NOVEL
6
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LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

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AFTERWORD
Newsletter

VOLLEYBALL GIRL A
"Oh, isn't this lovely! Just looovely!♥"
"Stop it! Not there!"
SHALLICERES
CERES

HARUKA
ANGELICA
In the midst of this raging dance of inexplicable, incomprehensible attacks, I activated it—Life or Death.
I seized control of my orbiting body, launching myself forward in a slash, which Miss Armor Rep reciprocated—and as our blades met, I saw surprise flicker in her eyes. I did it. For the first time, for a single moment, I stopped her attacks. That had to be enough to pass.

LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

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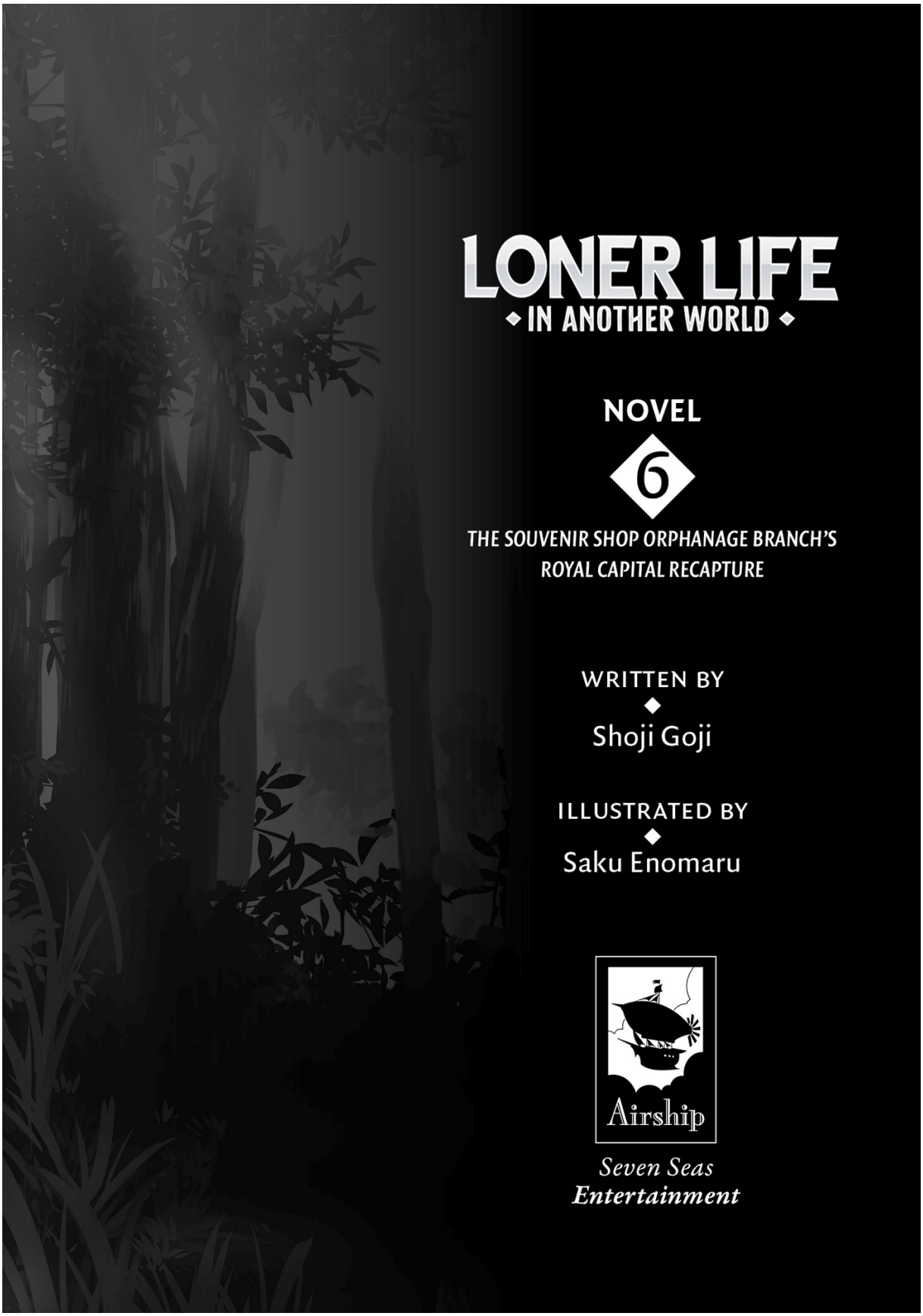


LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

NOVEL

6

THE SOUVENIR SHOP ORPHANAGE BRANCH'S
ROYAL CAPITAL RECAPTURE

WRITTEN BY

Shoji Goji

ILLUSTRATED BY

Saku Enomaru

Airship

Seven Seas
Entertainment

CHARACTERS

QUEEN BEE

One of Haruka's classmates. Leader of a group of five fashion-obsessed girls. A former model.

BOOK CLUB PRESIDENT

One of Haruka's classmates. A level-headed strategist who was involved with literary activities back in school. Has known Haruka since elementary.

SHIELD GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. A serious girl who protects everyone with her massive shield. Tends to get knocked around a lot from taking so many hits.

NUDIST GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. A former candidate for Japan's Olympic swim team. Close with Fish Girl as a former swim team member.

FISH GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. After getting chased around by guys in the fantasy world, deeply distrusts men...besides Haruka.

GYMNASTICS GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. A former candidate for Japan's Olympic gymnastics team. An alchemist who transforms gymnastics equipment into weapons.

SHALLICERES

The princess of the Kingdom of Diorelle. Traumatized by experiencing the half-naked heave-ho of the pseudo-dungeon. Also known as the Royal Girl and Shillyshally.

SLIME EMPEROR

A former dungeon boss. Absorbs enemy skills with Predation. Haruka used "Servitude" on it.

STALKER GIRL

The daughter of the chief of the Shino clan, a family specializing in reconnaissance. A top-class spy with Perfect Invisibility.

CERES

Princess Shalliceres's maid. Has served as the princess's guard and body double from a young age.

MEROPAPA

The Duke of Omui. An invincible warrior hero known as the Frontier King and War God, among other titles.

MERIELLE

The daughter of the Duke of Omui. Unable to remember her name, Haruka calls her Merimeri, and now so does everyone else.

CLASS REP

The student council president of Haruka's class. Talented leader. Has known Haruka since elementary school.

HARUKA

A high school student summoned to another world. The only member of his class not to receive a cheat skill from God.

ANGELICA

The former emperor of the Ultimate Dungeon. Haruka used "Servitude" on her. Also known as Miss Armor Rep.

VICE REP A

One of Haruka's classmates. A cool beauty prone to glaring at the guys when they do something stupid.

VICE REP B

One of Haruka's classmates. An absentminded girl who was voted most popular student in the class. An Archsage.

VICE REP C

One of Haruka's classmates. A lively ankle-biter who longs to grow up into an adult. She's like a class mascot.

STORY

Haruka, a loner, was summoned to a fantasy world along with his class. He took on the responsibility of mentoring his classmates and obtained top-tier items by raiding dungeons. The classmates finally reached level 100 by defeating a level 100 dungeon king, achieving "Ubermensch" status.

Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Diorelle sent assassin after assassin into the frontier. One assassin was the maid Ceres, who attacked Haruka to retrieve her mistress, Princess Shalliceres. She watched him from the shadows and made an attempt on his life but failed to take him out. Haruka forgave her, adding Ceres as yet another ally.

The relationship between the kingdom and the frontier continued to fracture. Shalliceres felt that it was her duty as princess to stop the impending war, and so headed for the capital. Haruka joined her as her escort. After managing to repel the world's deadliest assassin, Dajimakam, they hurried on toward the capital, only to encounter the king's brother, the chancellor of Diorelle, fleeing from pursuing attackers...

PROLOGUE

◆

THE HORSES CHARGED, kicking up clouds of dust. There was some sort of rebellion going on… Was it just a rebellious phase?

"Royal Girl! There are horses coming. Do you happen to know them? They seem to be running this way at a galloping pace. You can see a cloud of dust, so it's like they're racing or something? They could vanish at any moment, but they'd vanish with all their running, galloping might, so I guess you can't really lose them."

Thing was, they were coming this way. Those were some serious stallions coming this way, but the closer I looked, the more old dudes I saw. If those stallions planned to cockblock me, I wouldn't be pleased.

"Horses? There aren't people with them? I see flags and something like armor… Ceres, my weapon!"

Look, we were on the same page about the horse-like beings headed this way, but what was with the flags? A red cross…was this a blood drive or something?!

"Well, there's some sort of flag-like device painted with some sort of red diamond with a white X through it on a white background kinda thing? If they're tranquil as a forest, but raging fire within…should we be swift as a coursing river, with the force of a great typhoon? Mysterious as the dark side of the moon? Let's find our center, so we're sure to win…"

I don't remember the part of *Mulan* that had a reckless charge like this, but maybe it was more of a reference to the Red Cross?

"The Red Rhombus—how did the chancellor end up here?! I-impossible, we must rescue him! He must have enemies after him!"

"His Royal Highness acts as representative of the kingdom. There's no way he should be away from the capital. Something's not right."

It didn't matter if he was friend or foe: when the line of succession is undecided, princes mysteriously fell ill, got sick, wound up dead, got

attacked, lead uprisings, started civil wars, and all that. How did they have any time left over for attacking the frontier? The kingdom would collapse without spellstones, though, so I supposed they had no choice.

"There aren't any flags behind them, but I do see green armor with a white mark. Hmmm, it looks like they're getting chased, but all I can sense is a high density of old dudes. I guess I'll light them up."

"A white line on dark green…those are the church's soldiers!" cried Princess Girl. "How are they here? That marks the Theocracy's anti-beastfolk faction—how did they get into the kingdom? And why are they attacking the prince?! Is this…is this war?"

Theocracy? Those were the old dude's peeps, yeah? The prince *might* be our ally, but the church was definitely our enemy. They called the frontier a poisoned land and operated a brutal anti-fair-trade monopoly to coopt all the spellstones for the sake of "purification" or whatever.

They'd also declared that at the bottom of the Ultimate Dungeon lay a devil woman who must be sealed away for all eternity, so I didn't think they were very nice. They sure liked to righteously do their weird justice in the name of some god or other. I'd be happy to justly, righteously slaughter them and send them to whatever old fellow's white room they thought came after all this. That woman they hated was left alone in the darkness for an eternity, and struggled and fought her way through to emerge as Angelica. So if she was evil, that made me an ally of evil, right? Yeah, trash like that deserved to be burnt. I'd break their monopoly all the way to that white room and slam the door on 'em and their god. People sure love God—but it's a one-sided deal, if you ask me. Personally, I say it's time to bring God down to earth. *God* was the guy screwing with our happiness down here.

"Oh, we should call in the nerds," I said. "If they're calling beastfolk foul creatures, that means there are probably enslaved beastfolk and all that jazz. They certainly won't let that stand. They *love* animal ears, and they'll go to town on any animal-ear abusers, I'll tell you that."

Jiggle jiggle.

If the nerds got their hot hands on beastfolk, I doubted that we'd ever see them again. I'd give them an amiable and courteous one-way vacation to the land of the old god dude. *The results are priceless! Just pay me in advance!*

DAY 62

NOON

If it's that thing and the other thing, then which thing is it?

WASTELAND

OUR ARMY IN SHAMBLES, we fled for the frontier. For the Theocracy to launch a surprise attack on myself, the chancellor, showed that their true intentions were to ensnare the kingdom, enslave the frontier, and ensure a complete monopoly over the spellstones. *That is how far they have fallen.*

Our kingdom recognized alliances with beastfolk nations, one of the few nations to acknowledge their basic rights. For that reason, we became enemies of the church. Now with the backing of the nobles, the Theocracy intended to change the laws of the land. But those rights were fundamental to the values of our nation. Values we could never change.

No matter how strong the Theocracy became, they could not oppose us. Without our spellstones, they had no means to grow their own powers. That had changed. The church now had a monopoly on spellstone crafting, calling all other spellstones 'impure' and defiled, and labeling anyone else who dared to craft with spellstones witches, subjecting them to torture and punishment. They even went so far as to hunt out and kill all the spellstone crafters in the land, attempting to monopolize that source of wealth for themselves. The Theocracy launched invasion after invasion across the continent to this end. Eventually, they monopolized spellstone crafting, and gathered enough power that even the royal family could scarcely defy them.

Now they've bought off our own nobles and brought them into their fold, even the first prince of the kingdom and our intelligence corps, I thought. *At this point, it's practically a farce.* Without any access to contrary information, the royals were easily duped.

"We may not make it to the frontier."

A mercenary band in green armor with a white stripe, renowned for its prowess in fighting in the woods, pursued our army. We tried to escape

to open plains, but even so they pushed us to the brink of annihilation. We had no time to regroup. The enemy was too strong. And we had no access to intel, either. Any information that reached us would be a trap leaked by the Theocracy.

"It would be shameful to fall without presenting ourselves to Duke Omui for his justice, but our fortune appears to have run out."

"We are your shield, my pri—*agh*!"

Blast! I was unable to fulfill my role as chancellor. Unable to apologize to Duke Omui. All I could do was hopelessly race toward the frontier. I had to at least warn them that the church's army was on the move. *I have to.*

"We have a sighting! Ahead, an unarmed commoner! Just one!"

"It's unfortunate, but we have no choice—cut through!"

I couldn't ask the commoner to forgive us. Death would be very final, after all. If we could just get closer to the frontier, then we could forewarn them of the movements of the church's army…that was my sole duty at this point. That duty was all that was left of our kingdom. We were history.

I could see the commoner ahead in a black cloak. Then, suddenly, they vanished.

"A trap?"

"No, sir, but…where did they go?"

Even if it were a trap, we had no choice but to advance. Even a single step was closer to the frontier. That was all that mattered.

"Rearguard, ready for battle! The black-cloaked man is now fighting the enemy army! They've…stopped?!"

What was happening? Was this our chance to counterattack, or our chance to flee? *No, don't lose focus—we have to get to the frontier!*

"There's a flag ahead. Red on white, a sword and a heart. It's the princess! She's alone, but armed!"

The princess raised her banner vigorously, despite how making herself more visible put her at a terrible disadvantage. *This is why the other princes feared her and tried to kill her. Her charisma conquers all.*

All alone, without even a horse, standing tall, armed with a sword and surrounded by soldiers. The true spirit of royalty pulsed through her veins—she was a true royal knight, the royal princess, Shalliceres. If Shalliceres issued orders, our unruly mass of soldiers would form behind her to dispel an enemy force ten times their number. No wonder our men put their lives in her hands.

"Shalliceres! She's safe! But she's been caught by the enemy!"

"Your Highness, don't stop now! Let the rearguard protect her! Actually, I don't think she needs it!"

I glanced behind me and saw hell. The Grim Reaper had mowed down the enemy army with relentless, murderous fury, leaving a swamp of blood and bodies. The black-cloaked figure had no intentions of disappearing after all, or even fleeing—it had charged straight into the fray! All that remained were corpses and silence.

The Reaper wiped away the powerful enemies, trampled them by his lonesome. There were nearly one hundred horseback knights, half of whom he dispatched in a single blow, and then he scoured the wasteland to dispose of the remainder. *This is hell,* I thought, *a nightmare unlike any other.*

"Your Highness, why are you here?" It was Shalliceres. So she was with the black-cloaked figure? "Did something happen in the capital?"

"Wh-what just happened?" I gasped. "Who…who is that?"

"Oh, he's my…guard? Except he's focusing more on killing all the enemies than guarding me. But yes, he's supposed to be my guard."

Her escort? So Duke Omui sent assistance? But still…I didn't understand. You couldn't call what just happened here a fight.

We walked along the rampaging uproar of ravaging violence. The world slipped into silence as the screams and groans vanished one by one. The black-cloaked Reaper walked among the fallen knights, delivering them eternal quiet. The Reaper flickered like a shadow in candlelight, dancing among the dead. The next thing I knew, there were no knights, no corpses—nothing at all.

The surviving soldiers, as tough as they were, were trying to escape with their lives, but the Reaper already had them trapped in his cage. He let

only the horses escape, but not a single one of the knights. They vanished from the face of the world. The horses ran. The field was desolate, as if they had never existed. A single, black-cloaked figure stood alone on a truly empty field.

I tentatively approached the figure. It was a young boy.

"Thank you, Lord Haruka," Shalliceres said. "I cannot thank you enough for securing the safety of the chancellor, who serves as the representative of our kingdom."

"Uh, well it doesn't have anything to do with me, so whatever," the boy said. "I was planning to send those old dudes off to the other side either way. But if I sent them as a package for the nerds, I don't think they'd be very happy with me. Yeah, I killed 'em. Whoopsy daisy, I guess."

The Reaper was this insolent brat? I had half a mind to teach him his place, but of course I couldn't. Not after seeing what he was capable of. And Shalliceres didn't seem to take issue with his manner or speech, nor did her hot-tempered maid. I was at a complete loss.

"Your Highness, this is Lord Haruka, who came to the Omui domain from a distant land as a visitor, or like a… Well, I guess that's exactly what he is. So kindly ignore his rudeness, it's just part of his deal."

Part of *his deal*? Still, I could not mistreat a visitor of Duke Omui's, no matter how rude his behavior; surely there was some explanation. I took a long look at him. He appeared to be no more than a brat, and a measly level 21 brat at that. Despite this, he was dangerous. With what I just witnessed, he was deadly.

"Thank you for all you have done for Shalliceres as well," I said. "Is Duke Omui on his way here, or are you here on his orders? We have no ill will—we simply want to talk to Lord Meropapa. Where is the main Omui force?"

The boy wasn't listening. I, the representative of the kingdom, forgave his insolence once before, but now he refused to hear me? If he were not a guest of the Duke's, I would punish him on the spot, powerful or no. How could anyone forgive this level of sheer, brazen impudence?

"Take him into custody, but be sure not to injure him," I commanded.

“Your Highness, wait! He—”

Even if Shalliceres tried to protect him, I could not forgive such disrespect. I was the representative of Diorelle! *I will not tarnish the good name of our king!* And not just his name, but my own. If I did not have my honor, what meager apologies would I be able to offer to Lord Meropapa?

I must act for the king until my head is severed from my shoulders, I thought. Until I reached Duke Omui, bowed my head to him on behalf of the king, and offered the apologies he deserved—and after that, nothing. The frontier: that was where my destination lay, as did my tomb.

DAY 62

AFTERNOON

I'd rather make love than war.

WASTELAND

AFTER EVERYTHING, I finally made it. I'd journeyed far, searched high and low. After all of my struggles in this fantasy world, at last I encountered them. I had given up long ago, but here they were at long last. I'd lost faith. I had forgotten my hopes and dreams, time and time again. Every night as I stared up into the starry sky, I saw them, like phantoms projected on the sky. Those nights were so long. But every night turns into dawn.

Because finally—it finally happened.

"Feeemaaaale kniiiiights! Not old dudes!"

In this purgatory of old dudes, this hell of a fantasy world, all the warriors I had seen were men, old men…but today, finally—a female knight! She was wearing armor, but above that was bright red hair and a stern, beautiful, pale face—there were female knights in this world after all! I was on the verge of burning down heaven and earth, but I supposed there was no need anymore. All of my patience had been worth it. Because here she was—a female knight! Even the thieves had been all men, not a single babe among them. No matter how much I searched in town, not one sexy lady assassin, either. But here she was—a beautiful female kniiiiiiiiight!

"Take him into custody. Be sure not to injure him."

Some old dude was saying something. *Dude, read the room!* Forget him, I didn't have time for geezers anymore. He clearly didn't understand the gravity of my discovery.

"Your Highness, wait! He—wh-why is he so happy?"

Why? *Why?* Because yet another beautiful female knight appeared! This one was a brunette with deep chestnut-brown hair. She was lovely! She had severe features, but that was lovely in its own way! And they were both

coming right for me. *A-am I about to be wrapped in their arms from both sides?!* Had I reached my popular phase? Finally? *After all this time?!*

"It's been building up for the past sixteen years, but here it is! My popular phase!"

Oh, and they were escorting me! Escorts! They held me on both sides. My god, these women were *forward!* Was I about to be enveloped by their advances? Please?

I noticed a small wooden bed in the horse-drawn carriage brought here. *So, they planned this all along? Spicy!*

"That bed's a little small," I pointed out. "It'd be tight for one, much less two. Although I am a loner, so what do I know?"

I can't escape! Ooh, they were stripping down? Is that why they left me in here? Ah, of course, armor was no good for what they had planned. Naturally.

"Hey, if you had let me know I'd have made you both something a little more comfortable. But I suppose you knights are the modest types, huh?"

Absence makes the heart grow hornier. Sexy things come to those who wait, so *goddamn* was I in for a good time.

"He isn't listening to a word we're saying. What insolence! Shall I stab him?"

"Uh…you'll see once you talk to Mistress Class Rep-sama," Princess Shalliceres said. "I don't think there is anything we can do."

The sexy knights weren't coming back. Still, I had to be patient. Girls took a long time to get dressed. But this could be a signal announcing the rebirth of my sex appeal, although if my sex appeal didn't show up even after the signal got sent out…well, maybe it'd taken a wrong turn and got lost.

"But like, we came all the way this way and you're just going back the way we came? I didn't even get to do my village shopping. Y'all really want to go back to the frontier?"

That wouldn't do. I had to wait for my sexy female knights. It was high time we embarked on my teenage-boy fantasy adult experience-slash-

adventure. Technically, I was already in a fantasy world, but this was going to be a whole new kind of fantasy!

I was a bit concerned about the size of the bed for three of us, though. And a wooden bed? Seriously?

"First expand the bed…there's not enough space here. Better make this whole carriage a bed!"

Yes, attention to detail. That would be the key to the rebirth of my sex appeal! But if the key didn't fit in the locks, I was screwed!

"A wooden bed and wood walls. So outdated," I sighed. "Doesn't anybody care about the importance of atmosphere?"

First, make the walls white, and then a dark-colored bed for a moody atmosphere. There was a tight ambience to it, a gripping feeling. That didn't sound half bad to me. It sounded absolutely amazing, actually, but it was still too small. So, I went ahead and expanded the entire carriage.

"And as the carriage bumps and jostles, I wouldn't mind another more furious kind of bumping, but still, I'll add some more car suspension. Oh, and white sheets…and flowers, duh! Those are the tender touches that will lead to my sex appeal's ultimate revival in a New Game+! Re:Sex Appeal! Ooh, and what else, what else…?

"Hm, what's the right way to put this? Is this cart before the horse? Am I gonna stress the horses at the front of the cart? Is it overkill? Will I kill the horses? Well, these horses are tough, so they'll be fine. Probs?"

I was gonna work those horses, oh yeah. I'd upgrade the carriage wheels with bearings to minimize friction. That'd make the ride smoother, and now I could increase the weight of the carriage by expanding it. The look was a bit gaudy, but how better to introduce myself to my two sexy female knights? I needed to use *some* decoration!

"Yes, then a king-size bed and chandelier inside. Some art deco stuff on the walls. Oh, and then a door or like a small jail-style barred lattice door with a private feel, 'cause I wouldn't want to get seen by the girls and stuff. Something splendid for sure. Now I just have to wait for them to arrive… man, they're taking their time."

Now the carriage was cute, straight out of a fairy tale. The inside was stuffed with dense, dark, *romantic* vibes. Carriage complete! Couldn't have a better *hello* than that, right?

With the decoration handled, I went back inside the carriage. I guessed everyone was enjoying it? Seemed pretty popular. They were sure staring at it. And me!

"This guarantees that not two, but three, even four sexy female knights can come party with me! Ya dig?!"

I rolled around on the king-sized bed, letting my teenage-boy imagination run wild, visualizing in perfect detail the various roly-poly activities that would be rolled and poled upon this bed. But why were they glaring at me?

"…"

I felt someone staring daggers! Oh, it was the maid. *Seriously, shadow glares?*

"Go ahead, glare all you want. I couldn't go to the guild this morning, and since Miss Armor Rep is on an errand, I've been suffering a dire glare shortage. So please, do your worst."

I whipped up some tea in the meantime. Fortunately, I had prepared a small counter inside the bedroom. My foresight had no blind spots!

"How *can* a shadow glare, anyway? Here ya go, tea. Oh, and sweets! It's a sweet snack called manju, and it goes perfectly with tea. I've got a real good feeling about its bestseller prospects, ya know?"

"The princess told me to come check on you but…you seem to be enjoying yourself."

Oh no, the enjoyment for me was about what came next, all for the purpose of being told the *next* morning that I must've had a good time *last* night. Let's friggin' *go*! I had, fun, fun, fun before me!

As Maid Girl and I jabbered about whatever, we drank tea. Maid Girl seemed to think tea was a big enough treat to drag herself out of the shadows, and for offering her some I was rewarded with laying eyes on her magnificent revealing dress. Naturally.

She offered some kind of exposition. Apparently Princess Girl was fighting with the prince? I'd rather make love than war, so this seemed out of my area of expertise. I didn't understand what they were fighting about. I guess she couldn't accept his orders and he'd captured a certain individual who was living a life of leisure and luxury? So, the problem at hand was how that captured individual managed to live such a luxurious, leisurely life? No idea what they were on about, but it sounded like a mess.

"I'd help with a mass breakout if they want?"

"There is no need. You've already broken out and came back to make renovations, and now you're lazing about back inside!"

"Look, there are some oddballs in this world," I said. "Even some people who purposefully commit crimes so they can get locked up in jail. People are weird. What can you do?"

Glare. Well, there was nothing for me to help with, and when I asked her what we were doing next, she said she would check with the princess and vanished into a shadow. Why didn't she just walk out the room like a normal person?

"Maid life seems tough," I said. "Although, I haven't met any other maids in this world—can they all melt into shadows? Maybe I should start examining more shadows in case maids fall out?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Now we were back in the ruins of the neighboring domain. And where were those sexy female knights?

I was bored. Slimey wriggled and rolled around on the bed. He looked like he was having a good time, so I tried it myself, and it was surprisingly fun.

Occasionally, I went up on top of the carriage to use Clairvoyance for a look around, but I didn't see anything. Those sexy female knights still weren't back. They must've been having a tough time deciding on their outfits. I didn't mind it if they came back without any clothes at all. Seemed like they weren't the nudist types. They did wear armor, after all.

We were approaching the pseudo-dungeon, but since I was here the traps wouldn't activate. I had issued Princess Girl a temporary pass so we

could go through without issue. The problem was that Miss Armor Rep and my classmates were waiting for us there. *Getting caught tangled up with the sexy female knights in there would be a surefire route to a lecture!*

DAY 62

EVENING

The names posted all over the city can't possibly be the official name, right?

MURIMURI CASTLE

A WELL-ATTIRED TROOP of elite knights marched toward us in perfect formation. They flew the banners of the king's younger brother and the kingdom: proof that these knights were the representatives of the kingdom.

They were clothed in elegant equipment, sumptuous armor, lavish enough to arrest the eye. With their fine armaments and daunting armor, they formed an imposing, impressive, impactful legion of knights.

However, my gaze was instantly torn away to a gorgeous, gaudy carriage. Was carriage an apt term? It was like a palace on wheels. It was as light as air compared to its towering size, and it sailed smoothly over the ground without so much as a bump.

The unparalleled beauty of the princess's guard led the procession. They glittered as if out of a dream. The army was truly outfitted as befitted the supreme ruler of the continent, valiant enough to force anyone to their knees before their glimmering, majestic awe. Their movements overflowed with awe-inspiring nobility, profundity, and magnificence.

"That's our prisoner," a tired soldier announced to us. "We held him in a cell, which he then turned into that luxurious carriage. He occasionally escapes before returning to the cell of his own free will."

The enchanting carriage that had entranced us all was supposed to be a prison. Well, I didn't understand, but I had an inkling. There were many inexplicable things in this world, but when it came to the truly incomprehensible, that boy was usually at the center of it. When the door to the sublime carriage swung open, the prisoner leisurely sauntered out of his own accord.

The black-cloaked boy casually strolled out of the carriage and was soon flanked by the wondrous guard of the princess's knights. The knights hurried to make way for him as he calmly advanced. He strolled forward without even giving the chancellor, representative of Diorelle, so much as a glance.

This boy was on another level. An omnipotent being. The squawks and squabbles of nobles and dukes, kings and emperors, meant nothing to him. He loomed high above law, authority, might, right, and justice. He paid not even the slightest attention to birth, status, position, or authority—he simply acted according to his own unconquerable whims. The prince in his sumptuous, armored glory was a mean peasant before him.

And yet he did not flaunt his power. Like a humble fisherman by the shore, he simply lived out his days, pulling the rest of us along in his wake. He ambled leisurely, purposelessly. Yet he guided the path of our nation away from the king and into the control of the princess.

"I'm back and stuff. Well, these people are here too, but I'm not sure why. Pretty much all I did was conduct some souvenir business. But I'm back now! Oh, Mr. Meridad, what are you doing? Huh—you tried to apologize to Mrs. Murimuri? Are you in the doghouse?! Not sure if the kobold doggos can take a bite out of your lover's quarrel for you, but the mean girls might? They bite! It hurts. A lot!"

The boy approached with a smile. That was all he did—smile. That was how high above us he soared. He was like the mountains, or the sea. *No matter how human minds try to impose order on them, we cannot.*

"Ah, Haruka-kun, thank you for taking care of the princess," I said. "Now let's go talk things over inside Murimuri Castle…somehow, this has become the name of this fort throughout Omui. Why might that be? I'm just passing by, for the record, I'm not in the doghouse or anything. I have no wish to be bitten! In fact, for someone in a lover's quarrel, getting bitten is only more upsetting for them. So let's put that out of our minds and forget I said anything. I have no wish to go to the doghouse, you see."

My advisor showed Haruka-kun and his companions inside, so I went to greet the chancellor. He appeared to be a bit overwhelmed by the fortress, just staring with a vacant expression. I decided I had better lend him a hand. He'd always been stubborn since he was a boy; he always demanded I bow

deeply before his elder brother, the king. He was serious, polite, and blunt. Too honest. Too stubborn.

Acting as the representative of the kingdom in this situation must have been unbelievably difficult for him. He had a downcast expression and forlorn eyes set in an exhausted face. With his older brother's health in steep decline, he was entrusted with the responsibility for the kingdom at the moment of its collapse. After endless, torturous persecution, he'd found the resolve to make his way here today.

While the captive boy smiled brightly, the prince who represented our kingdom had a tragic, trembling face. Only the prince suffered from the weight of responsibility.

"Welcome to Omui," I said. "We are delighted that Your Highness has traveled all this way to our remote domain. I offer you our warmest welcome as the ruler of the Omui people. We have but a meagre—" and here, I glanced around and remembered to update my speech, "Ahem. A spacious and fabulous palace for you to rest up in. So please, follow us inside."

"Lord Meropapa, there is no need for such formalities. It is Diorelle that should be bowing and scraping at the feet of Omui. We have done you great wrong, such wrong that we are unworthy to bow our heads and apologize. And yet, Lord Meropapa…Duke Meropapa, I'm sorry… I'm sorry…"

His face crinkled in agony as he held back tears. I recognized the same face from when we were children. He was still the polite, resolute man to his brother's free spirit. The king did nothing, nothing beyond asking Shalliceres to keep the Omui safe. All the responsibility, all the weight fell onto the chancellor's shoulders.

He'd been gravely mistaken, to be sure, but he came in person to apologize and beg forgiveness for forcing our domain to face destruction. Even though he hardly had a choice against the pressure of the Theocracy and all the mighty houses of the continent.

There was no need for it. We would never have bowed. We had absolutely no intention of letting ourselves be destroyed. We did not rend our clothes and resign ourselves to our fate. For that, we could credit the smiling boy behind us. He'd taught us that freedom.

But the chancellor had not yet realized that he accidentally took into custody the very boy to whom he truly should bow his head—the one who had defeated the Ultimate Dungeon, the boy who had felled the forest. It seemed as though Haruka-kun had not realized it himself, so it would be best to just leave things as they were. I needed to consult with his interpreter, Miss Class Rep, about this matter.

As the prince bowed repeatedly to me, he wept and proclaimed his pain at the tragedy that the kingdom caused to befall our domain. Clearly, his guilt ran deep.

I replied softly to the prince…to Musjix. "Please, let's talk inside. And a high prince should not bow to a mere duke like me. Have pride as a royal, Prince Musjix." I patted him on the back, and he finally lifted his exhausted head. He had grown thin and old since I saw him last. I needed to make sure he ate some proper food. *I'll ask Haruka-kun*.

I told him we had much to talk about, but that he needed to rest up first. All of his troops were exhausted and their equipment filthy, and there were far too few of them to make up a king's legion. So even His Highness had been attacked… This conflict ran deeper than we knew. He must've come to inform me of the war and tragedy that had befallen the kingdom; to apologize for Diorelle's role in the upcoming war and the tragedy and destruction that would result. He came to offer us his life.

Even if tragedy were on its way, I honestly could not think of anything that posed harm to us here. A first principle of military strategy: when defending, consider how you would attack. A method to attack Omui escaped me completely. I tried to think, to examine every possible way that you might topple our domain. But you couldn't—even if the only way was to try to starve Omui in a war of attrition, there would be no way to assemble an army capable of outlasting us. *Honestly, how could you?*

Regardless, it would be madness to wage war on the duchy with the boy on our side. And with the peerless guard led by the princess, no enemy stood a chance. Our enemy's defeat was assured before you even began to count our soldiers.

That boy was deeply familiar with the logistics of war—you could rightfully call him a peerless tactician.

“Here, these are like some white papers on war and stuff that I wrote about how to defend, uh, Omo? Well, ya know, this place. And not white papers. Just like, papers?”

With those words, he bestowed upon me a book full of unbelievable strategies. Just how exhaustively he must have needed to research the art of war to arrive at such conclusions—it was a terrifying book! And…of course, he still could not remember the name of our duchy.

The boy handed these documents to me with complete nonchalance. He said, “Best to win without fighting, am I right? ’Cause if you fight, you lose. Seriously?”

His words were horrifyingly true. As ironclad as our domain’s defenses were, that boy himself was truly unbeatable. He and his allies were invaluable to us. Who else in our nation would have traversed the Ultimate Dungeon—nay, even the monster forest?

Still, the boy smiled. Even if we told him we were doomed, he’d simply ask, “How?” Maybe I should ask him how he would do it, if only to aid my own studies.

DAY 62

AFTERNOON

Definitely maybe probably surely this won't be beloved as a flower sightseeing spot.

PSEUDO-DUNGEON

SO, SOMETHING HAPPENED when we went to meet up with Haruka-kun. So remember the strongest, most terrifying dungeon of all? The Ultimate Dungeon? The lower floors were called limitless floors by some, and below them lurked the Ultimate Dungeon Emperor. Shrouded in mystery, regarded by all as the most powerful Dungeon Emperor in the world. Well, that legendary Dungeon Emperor was…building a souvenir shop in the pseudo-dungeon. *Uh, what is happening?!*

"Haruka-kun was saying the army is on its way," I said, "but there's no food in the neighboring domain. Is he planning on gouging them?"

Nod nod.

Apparently he'd sauntered off to build. He was *supposed* to be guarding the princess…although he did stay by her side. He'd left the stone golems to handle the heavy lifting, supervised by Angelica-san. She nodded *yes* to this and shook her head *no* to that, directing the golems with the blueprints in hand.

"Why is he having a former Dungeon Emperor make a souvenir shop in the pseudo-dungeon?!"

"Something is very wrong about this!"

He hadn't even started selling manju yet. I was still craving those. He sure was taking his time.

"What's he waiting for?"

"Why did the princess enlist the fragile Haruka-kun as her guard in enemy territory, while the invincible Dungeon Emperor is over here doing errands?!"

“With Slimey, he should have no problem taking down the most powerful, unstoppable enemies in the entire universe. But still!”

“Yeah, I’m not exactly concerned about his safety…”

“Shouldn’t we be?!”

Haruka-kun’s plan went as follows: “Chill out and fish up some bad dudes in the neighboring town to exterminate the bandits. Ya know?” How incredible, that he could call that a plan. It was barely a sentence. It was more holes than substance!

“Maybe we should draw them off? With like, a diversion?”

“No. So long as they stay in the neighboring town, there’s no rush.”

“Can we trust a guy who doesn’t follow plans to follow a plan that isn’t a plan?”

“No way he’ll follow it!” everyone shouted.

So, we sent out scouts while the rest of us helped build the souvenir shop. Our compensation for assisting with the construction was manju, so I couldn’t afford to leave! We all started arranging the pennants and travel passports.

“Wouldn’t it be illegal to sell passports to Omui here…?”

“Yep, this whole shop is super shady!”

If you purchased one of the official travel passports from the shop, then as a limited-time bonus, the stone golems wouldn’t attack you. But there were still the traps in the rest of the pseudo-dungeon, so the shop was just a nasty scam. Haruka-kun had installed a rafflesia in the back for anyone who had broken through, too: “Rafflesia Flower: Rafflesia growth, control, manipulation.” With this item, he started growing rafflesia that could move of their own accord. And they were naturally equipped with the devastating trio of Tentacles, Corrosion, and Equipment Disintegration!

“Maidens better not enter the pseudo-dungeon!”

“No one could make it through there, right?”

“All the travel passports do is temporarily halt the stone golems. You’ll still get caught by the traps and attacked by the rafflesia… The shop is an actual scam!”

“Those stone golems do a great job of acting like they can’t move, though!”

The souvenir shop also sold a variety of pennants in styles from triangular to mushroom-shaped, all labeled with the text “FRONTIER.” Why did he make a souvenir shop for Omui when he couldn’t even remember the name? And I didn’t think the mushroom-shaped pennants would sell. I mean, they were incredibly…graphic-looking?

“He’s even selling cheap equipment for everyone who got their weapons and armor melted in the dungeon.”

“Even though he’s the one that’s causing the melting!”

“And none of this equipment has any resistance, either?”

“It’s a melt-and-sell scheme!”

That’s why he increased the number of corrosive traps in the pseudo-dungeon. Throw in the rafflesia, too, and he was guaranteed to sell a ton of equipment.

Our scouts came back—Kakizaki-kun and his friends. Better they were gone anyway. They would’ve just gotten in the way of the construction.

“Don’t worry, they’re safe,” Kakizaki-kun said.

“But he wasn’t guarding her at all!”

They went to get the latest intel from someone with Stalker Girl’s clan. Haruka-kun was ambling around the city, luring the mercenaries out to come and fight, and then wiping them out. I had a very strong feeling Haruka-kun was going to come back talking about how he kept getting attacked, even though he was the one provoking everything. I mean, he was clearly targeting the bandits, but instead he was turning it into a nasty crybully game to wipe the bandits to dust.

“But it sounds like they’re on their way back.”

“Who knows? It made zero sense.”

Yup, the following explanation was incomprehensible. They rescued the prince’s army and were coming back, but they captured Haruka-kun in a

fancy carriage, but *then* he just walked out of it by himself, and he was headed this way. Huh?

It was the easiest thing in the world to come up with reasons *why* they might have captured him, but since it was obviously impossible to capture Haruka-kun, it made zero sense—even if you caught him, he could use Teleport so you certainly couldn't hold him captive. It sounded like he walked out of the carriage, so was he not actually a prisoner? It was all well and good that he was on his way back…but it sounded like he made the royals ride an ordinary carriage and kept the fancy one all for himself?

When we did meet up with him, he didn't exactly clarify anything.

"No, no, it's just like, there were these sexy female knights and they were *very* assertive so I kinda upgraded my carriage a bit? But I rode it alone. So I didn't do anything wrong, okay? I mean, I made a nice carriage, and prepared sweets for Maid Girl and stuff. Oh yeah, we ate manju. No, no, don't you get it, I'm the good guy here! I was just trying to escort some sexy knights! And I'm back and stuff! Ooh, and great work here, that's perfect! Yeah, so I came back and stuff, but I'm still waiting for the knights, right?"

As usual, I ignored Haruka-kun's testimony and asked Princess Girl and Maid Girl what happened. They explained that the prince had him arrested for insolence. They started profusely apologizing to us for that. But no, Haruka-kun getting arrested for being obnoxious was the most obvious thing in the world—his incorrigible insolence was as uncontrollable as anything else about him. No one was upset about him getting arrested over that. We didn't want the princess to apologize to us. How silly of her!

Haruka-kun didn't have a clue, as you might expect. He did realize that two of the knights were female, but he didn't realize he'd been rude toward the chancellor of the kingdom, and he didn't realize he had been arrested, either. *This requires a lecture.* I mean, not realizing he got arrested and just chasing after some female knights. That's guilt personified! He was going to the jail known as *lecture time*!

Before the kingdom's army attempted to capture him, they witnessed him singlehandedly wipe out the pursuant church's army. They seemed a little bit terrified of him. And then on top of that, the person in question renovated their jail into a luxurious and magnificent palace and enjoyed a

pleasant little journey, occasionally popping out of his prison to wreak havoc when he got bored. Yep, the poor army ended up capturing the one person who defied every law of physics, common sense, and capture. It'd been a tough few days for them.

As the fine kingdom carriages rolled onwards, we gave him a stern lecture on our way to Murimuri Castle. Kakizaki-kun's group and Oda-kun's group anchored the rearguard. As prime candidates for additional insolence, they were best kept at a distance.

Since we all had our "permanent employee passes" from the souvenir shop, the heavily armored stone golems moved out of the way and bowed before us. The kingdom's army fell dead silent in shock and reverence. They didn't realize that the real scary part of this dungeon was the rafflesia, but it was best to keep that a secret. Especially from the female knights! Those things were *obscene!*

Then, when we emerged on the other side, the soldiers let out sighs of relief. They didn't realize that if they let their guard down, they would be sent down a slide all the way back to the other side to have their equipment melted. We didn't want to freak them out, so we kept silent.

We sent a messenger over to Murimuri Castle. Meanwhile, Duke Omui came down to greet the prince. The army assembled in formation to greet him.

"Hmm, so how can we, like, explain to the duke what exactly this prisoner did?"

Unfortunately for the prisoner, there wasn't a single one among us who would attest to his innocence. He was insolent and downright evil. Being rude to people in authority was basically his defining sin. For some reason, however, Duke Omui seemed like he didn't care in the slightest, and neither did the princess…despite the sins he committed in her direction, including the half-naked heave-ho sexy-dress combo! *There's no justice for him.*

"I'm back and stuff. Well, these people are here too, but I'm not sure why. Pretty much all I did was conduct some souvenir business. But I'm back now! Oh, Mr. Meridad, what are you doing? Huh—you tried to apologize to Mrs. Murimuri? Are you in the doghouse?! Not sure if the

kobold doggos can take a bite out of your lover's quarrel for you, but the mean girls might? They bite! It hurts. A lot!"

It may not have looked like a prison, but the prisoner walked out of it like he owned the place. Duke Omui just smiled.

The prince and the army stared in silent horror at the relaxed Haruka-kun.

"Wow, that's refreshing!" the girls commented.

"Yeah, the frontier army is already totally immune to him!"

With the whole of Omui well familiar with Haruka-kun's antics, it was refreshing to see the genuine shock and terror of the kingdom army. An actual logical reaction, for the first time in ages. The whole barrel of Omui was already spoiled by the rotten apple of Haruka-kun. Even the duke of this place scraped and bowed before him. He dressed the princess up in a sexy dress…yeah, nothing could surprise the people here anymore. Even when he made fun of the princess nowadays, everyone laughed and smiled. *Our minds have been warped!*

"It's good to get mad at him once in a while, right?" Vice Rep A said.

"Not that it makes a difference."

Despite our daily lectures, he still went and got himself captured over the crime of insolence. It was shocking that he hadn't gotten arrested for that long ago, and despite the hard work of our lectures, he still went and did it… He was completely ignoring his captor, the prince, and having a boisterous chat with Duke Omui.

Then the princess went and joined him—even though he was supposed to be guarding her. In what world did this make any sense?! Grumbling our complaints, we followed him, and the waves of the kingdom's army processed into the fort after us.

Thinking on it…I guess in the end all that really did happen was conducting souvenir business?

DAY 62

NIGHT

It's only fair to fool them out of a lecture with a wondrous snack from a distant land.

MURIMURI CASTLE

I SHRANK BEFORE such overpowering might. Shameful behavior for a representative of the realm as this was, I couldn't help it—before me stood the god of war who led the heroic Omui family, Lord Meropapa. He was a different genus of person from someone like me, simply born into the royal family. Most overwhelming of all was the austerity and majesty of this conference room, the likes of which I had never seen before. *So, this is Omui,* I thought.

A man in my position could not cower for long. I came to dedicate my life to the service of Omui. *That is why I made it this far.*

"Are you saying that you will not surrender him? I have no more leverage in any negotiations with nobles. War will crush the domain, and the kingdom will fall to the Theocracy. And despite all of that, you protect the life of a single adventurer? That is the only avenue left to us!"

Meropapa was too stubborn. Why was he so determined to protect that insolent boy? My life might have been worth little, but was his truly too valuable to offer as well? Did they really intend on sacrificing an entire realm for one brat?

"We do not have the authority to do so," Lord Meropapa responded. "Do you intend to take him by force, Your Highness? You must listen to me —that boy, all by himself, brought peace and prosperity to our domain. I neither have the right to hand over the treasure nor the boy."

What?! Lord Meropapa, King of the Frontier, cowed by a child? Indeed, I was surprised by the prosperity of the frontier. It may have been more wealthy than the capital at this point. But that was looking too closely at the immediate profit. Why did Duke Omui feel such a sense of duty to a

carefree brat who had no duty to him? Why was he willing to sacrifice the greatest assets of the kingdom to protect one boy?

Think of the Omui family legacy, I urged in my mind. *They are renowned for their indomitable tenacity, their fearless way of life.* Duke Omui could clearly lead the kingdom in the event that the royals fell, hence his renown as the King of the Frontier, so why this move…? *It makes no sense!*

"Is it not worth sacrificing something to save the kingdom?" I argued. "The only chips we have are my head and the boy's. Even if the Theocracy retreats, the nobles will not—our only option is to negotiate. We must sacrifice something! I came here with that belief! I offer my life to you with that faith. Lord Meropapa, you must heed my words!"

That *brat*. He stumbled into the Ultimate Dungeon, and by blind luck emerged with its incredible fortune. That impudent whelp in his black cloak killed the Ultimate Dungeon.

The fortune he found in the dungeon must have been how he managed to defeat the mercenary troops dispatched by the Theocracy. That was the only way a level 21 brat could have survived. He needed to hand over such power to the nobles. That would be enough to return us to a position of negotiations.

Perhaps he'd used these powers to ensnare Lord Meropapa and Shalliceres with Mesmerize and Puppetry, but I could find no traces of inflicted ailments. Why, he must have fooled them with that sly tongue of his. How despicable! He had used his money and connections to leech off the domain!

"In that case, I must ask that you hand over the boy to me. I took him prisoner, after all."

"I cannot do that," Lord Meropapa responded. "You claim he was your prisoner, but he seemed to be walking about freely to me. That sounds like the furthest thing from a prisoner to my ears. But even if you issue a command as the kingdom's representative, that boy is an important visitor to Omui whom we must protect at all costs. No matter the reason, we cannot hand him over."

It's a stalemate, I thought. My plan had been to offer my own life in exchange for the boy's, but Omui had no intention of negotiating.

After that, I was led to a splendid guest room for a rest. It did appear that the frontier had been reborn. A guest room of such sumptuous luxury that I had not seen its like in any kingdom in the world. But there was no point to such wealth and prosperity, not if it spelled the doom of Omui! Perhaps the boy's actions had in fact led to peace in the frontier—perhaps the boy's petty self-indulgence led to the frontier's wealth. But why did the kingdom have to die because one boy got lucky?

"Tch, stubborn. Too stubborn," I seethed. "Why do they go so far to protect him?"

"The House of Omui is known for their loyalty and determination to repay debts. They must feel a debt of gratitude to the boy. The Ultimate Dungeon has caused untold suffering in the frontier, after all."

Shouldn't it have been impossible for a level 21 boy to defeat the Ultimate Dungeon? Surely it died in some accident, and the boy claimed credit and ran with it? How had a peerless warrior like Lord Meropapa, and the Sword Queen of Diorelle, Shalliceres, come to lionize this boy?

"Information!" I spat. "Tell me anything, even mere rumors!"

There must have been something essential I was missing. The boy must hold something of value…there must be some reason why they needed him.

"We have heard rumors of him currying favor with women by plying them with delightful, never-before-seen sweets and delicacies."

Sweets? It was fact that he had somehow managed to swindle twenty beautiful young women into serving him. Was he a gigolo? Had even Princess Shalliceres fallen prey? But then why would Lord Meropapa… Aha, he entranced Lady Merielle, and the family fell thereafter! Concrete proof that women were not fit for power. They could succumb to temptation from mere *sweets!*

"But I cannot believe that bright Shalliceres would fall so easily. And her nagging maid, too!"

Letting him live would bring nothing but trouble. But if we killed him, he no longer had value in negotiations. I would pay with my own life, but I already owed that as an apology to Omui. Taking his life would be an act of pure, selfish spite. No, we needed him to end this conflict.

There was a knock on my door. Lord Meropapa entered. Ours was a secret meeting.

"Apologies," he said. "Your Highness, do you really intend to turn the boy over to the nobles? Are you sure?"

"Lord Meropapa, I would never lie to you. If I did, I would never be able to look at my brother again, even in death. No matter what, I shall not deceive you."

Now that it was just the two of us, surely he recognized that. He must have been unable to state in public how his daughter was seduced by the urchin. That boy already had his harem of twenty black-haired beauties, but that had merely whetted his appetite! He entranced the daughter of the duke, then sank his fangs into the princess herself!

I caught sight of Shalliceres's shameless, revealing clothing before. Yes, it was more powerful than the mightiest treasures of the kingdom, but word had it that it was the craftsmanship of that brat. I did not want to hand over the kingdom to the Theocracy, but this lecherous boy could not be allowed to live. *Perhaps an assassin is the only option…*

"Personally, and as the leader of Omui, I cannot hand him over," Lord Meropapa said. "But the individual in question seems to wish to return with you. I'd like to stop him, but he's quite intent on it."

What? *You're toying with me, Omui.* He intended to wriggle his way into the kingdom to trap more women in his wicked brothel, I knew that much. He intended to add to his ranks! He was the director of a twisted farce. The thought of it revolted me.

But that scum was unstoppable once he set his mind to something. Very well, we would take him captive and retreat.

Back to the beginning. Back to the negotiations that could save our kingdom.

DAY 62

NIGHT

Isn't it discrimination to ban my massage machines?

MURIMURI CASTLE

MY PLAN FOR door-to-door selling to the nobles' army got overruled. But the old dude was gonna cover my travel costs, and there were even two hot female knights in his army, so I guess it was almost even.

"I mean, if we gotta wait for the nobles' army to get here it's gonna take ten more days. I'm gonna forget about this war crap in less than three! The old dude came all the way here, and they're gonna cover the travel costs, plus I made some carriage upgrades and all… The real fight starts now! Ya know?"

The girls came and brought me back while I was waiting for the sexy female knights at my carriage. But now I was gonna travel toward the nobles' army, apparently. The old dude asked me to come with him? I think that's what was up? Normally, if an old dude invited me anywhere, I'd burn his head off and run. But this old dude was the one that asked his two sexy female knights to escort me! See? There *were* useful old dudes in this fantasy world! And now he was going to upgrade my sexy female escorts on a climactic journey! No way was I gonna miss out on that! No teenage boy would!

"Handing over Haruka-san…"

"Yeah, he's such a pain!"

"Wait, we're doing it?!"

It did mean I wouldn't be able to open my new souvenir shop. Or sell manju, or frontier pennants. That'd be a loss. I could still try peddling—if I didn't feel like waiting around for them to come, I may as well go sell it to them. That's what they say on the motivational posters, right?

In this case, the destination was the church and their noble buddies' army, so I could send them to the old god dude's white room while I was at it. Trash like them deserved to get sent there by an illegal dumping removal service, paid in cash on delivery. But that meant I'd kill them before I could sell to them, which would totally erase the point of the souvenir shop at the pseudo-dungeon that I poured my heart and soul into. *What a waste.*

Still, no matter how much it cost me, I had to go there. Yes, an extremely important opportunity (sexy female knights) awaited my pursuit, a possibility (sexy female knights) that outweighed all risks, a reward (sexy female knights) that awakened in me a wayward want (for sexy female knights) that's way too hard!

Plus, it was better to move anyway. I didn't want to get my hands tied. I'd need to move if I wanted to have any chance of escaping this encirclement of eyes! I was in a bad position. I didn't have time, and I was surrounded by a siege of glares! If I didn't escape their encirclement, I'd be in for a lecture, with a side of a beating disguised as a training sesh.

"We're at the advantage with our defensive position. Why would you willingly give that up?" Class Rep asked.

"Yeah, if the pseudo-dungeon doesn't wipe them out, we can easily finish them off at Murimuri Castle."

"Leaving here is an unnecessary risk, especially after all the work setting up defenses."

Jiggle jiggle.

I wanted to at least try to convince them, but the problem was how, because they were 100 percent right. But that meant the sexy female knights would leave! If they were willing to stay, then so was I. I was more than happy to be in front of those oh-so-forward knights when they happened to move forward. Only happiness could come of that! *I won't let them leave. I won't!*

"So the majority is against me going? As in, all of you?"

"Especially with the way you're pumping your fist! There's something suspicious going on!"

There was literally zero advantage to going—I couldn't sell manju or pennants if I did. But sometimes, teenage boys have to forget about profit. If I could escalate this escort climax plan, then all my dreams could come true. I couldn't say it straight to the girls, though, or it'd be straight to lecture time. I needed to come up with some pretense for why I had to leave…but there weren't any.

The first thing I had to figure out was whether the enemy had long-range weapons. If they did, then approaching them was out of the question. I needed reconnaissance. If we could infiltrate their camps, then we'd be in business. I had Jupiter Eye to take a look, and then High-Speed Thinking to analyze the results.

The next thing was whether or not they had equipment that could survive the pseudo-dungeon. Crossing by air, underground, or through the dungeon were all dangerous. If they had some secret weapon in store, an army of that scale shouldn't be able to hide it. Some simple reconnaissance should reveal their hand.

Then there was one more possibility. If the king was bedridden—and the first prince was out leading the army on the way to the frontier—and the second prince went around the first prince to get here ahead of him, then that meant the capital was defenseless. Totally defenseless.

Waiting might be fun, but it limited our options. Someone else might make a move first. There was a strong possibility of that. I loved the fun and easy way out, don't get me wrong, but I definitely didn't like the idea of my possibilities getting squished by someone else doing whatever the hell they wanted. I learned it back in ethics: "Whatever is hurtful to you, make sure to do it to others." I mean, it was the basic Golden Rule of all ethics. I loved stuff that other people hated, and I was great at getting hated by other people. The last thing I wanted done to me was any teenage-boy-type shenanigans. I really preferred to make the first move.

Reconnaissance sounded like the best move here, yup. I could set some traps on the way over. Shave the enemy down with guerrilla warfare. Above all else, the old prince dude might be able to infiltrate the enemy army. Now, I liked the sound of that. Especially with lovely, forward female knights to be stepped in front of at every turn! *I'm going to infiltrate my sexy female knights, too!* The plan was practically perfect.

So! Goodbye, souvenir shop business (for now), and hello to peddling! No need for defense (a shop) when you've got offense (door-to-door)! Offensive is the best way to guarantee a rip-off. Some wise old dude said that once, probably, or something similar, but anyway—hell yeah, peddling! I could make a fancy souvenir shop in a carriage and head directly to my customers. A custom-designed carriage with a pushy salesman inside it was exactly what this world needed! At least, that's what I tried to tell the girls.

"You won't sell those pennants no matter how much you peddle."

"Why in the world would you make a souvenir store to sell pennants that just say 'FRONTIER' on them?!"

"And nobody wants the mushroom-shaped ones!"

"A souvenir shop where none of the stuff has the place's name on it totally defeats the point of souvenirs!"

"Although…I guess most people will get the gist from 'FRONTIER'?"

"And the manju will definitely sell! I would buy those even if they came with pennants, all of them!"

"And look at those 'FRONTIER' wooden swords. He imbued them with effects, didn't he?"

"I heard they're derived entirely from sustainable goblin clubs!"

Well, given their popularity in Japan, I assumed wooden swords were a key component of any souvenir shop, so I introduced a new line of products. They even had the name of the domain, "FRONTIER," engraved into them. I used Holding and Wood magic on some extra goblin clubs, then alchemy for some effect-endowed souvenirs that cost zero ele to make! They were cheap and frail, but they had a second use as firewood, so they were an extremely economical new product line. They'd been much stronger as clubs, though.

"That mushroom massage doll, though? Definitely obscene!"

Now they were trying to ban my products? I made an elaborately crafted, handmade, burly mushroom doll out of stamina mushrooms. Then with a little bit of vibration magic, boom, massage capabilities included. It was a truly ingenious design. I mean, I was reaping crazy profits from my

massage chairs; they were popular everywhere—in the duke's palace, the inn, the armory, the general store, all sending me a steady supply of pocket change. It only made sense that I wanted to release a massage product line. Those were banned all of a sudden? Massage products were okay if they looked like spellstones, so what was the difference? Was this mushroom discrimination?

By the way, thanks to my classmates and the soldiers, my "I ❤ FRONTIER" T-shirts had already sold out. I needed to come up with something new. I wasn't expecting those to sell that well.

"Maybe some 'I ❤ FRONTIER' bags or towels? I can make it a whole product line."

"Yeah," muttered the girls. "Why the hell did I buy that shirt?"

The lecture that went by the name of *meeting* continued until dinnertime. As in, Mr. Meridad came by and asked if I could make some dinner, so I ran away, and then whipped up a ridiculous amount of Chinese food in the grand dining hall. Fried rice, gyoza, egg foo young, karaage, stir-fry, all the classic dishes you can find at a cheap Chinese ramen joint. Everything but the ramen.

I heard the prince was picky, so I just served him fried rice at first. Then I saw his sexy female knights came with him, so I generously topped it off with gyoza and karaage. Those beauties needed to have the best of the best. It only took me about five minutes to make dinner for fifty, so it was no big deal.

Seemed like our strategy depended on Princess Girl, which sucked, but it would be easier to attack the enemy for sure at this juncture. Waiting was the easy way out, but we couldn't retreat any further. If we drove forward from here, we could always retreat if things went sour. So long as we didn't know what the enemy was hiding from us, it would be impossible to plan any further.

Class Rep and the others had prepared their inventories and refreshed their battle tactics. Normally, we would just let them attack us and respond in kind, but the fact that literally any attack could kill me made things tricky. It would be far easier and safer to attack them and go around picking off their forces, track down the ace up their sleeve, and boom. I had to go. *Alongside the sexy, forward female knights!*

We had individual rooms that night, so I went upstairs. Miss Armor Rep and the girls should be done with their meeting soon, so I wanted to come up with a plan before then, but Mr. Meridad and his group were having a dinner meeting. They wouldn't have a plan to put forward until night. *For the time being, I'll just do what comes natural.* As in my side job? Pretty much all I spent my time on anyway? If you wanna know the specifics: I was making another bra.

DAY 62

NIGHT

Don't pressure my souvenir shop customers.

MURIMURI CASTLE

GIRL'S MEETING

HARUKA-KUN MADE SURE to build a large girls-only bath at Murimuri Castle. Whatever structure he made, the bath always seemed to be top priority. Stalker Girl joined us and explained her latest intel, so we eventually puzzled out what Haruka-kun did today.

It was awful. Haruka-kun, with all of his weaknesses, especially when fighting against other people, fought the deadliest human murderer of all. A man who mastered the movements of the human body, who could penetrate thoughts, a master assassin, a shadow of the kingdom.

But since Haruka-kun's movements were incomprehensible to begin with, he took out the master assassin in one blow. *I guess Haruka-kun's not human after all?*

"Yeah, you can't read into what he does. It's all chaos."

In a convoluted confrontation, incomprehensible cogitation conquered all. Haruka-kun didn't move like a person. I'd had that thought before. But even a master of murder couldn't figure him out. *I knew his status was lying when it called him a human!*

"He put himself in danger. *Again*."

"And he fished up the most dangerous opponent he possibly could have."

He made sure to knock out and capture all of the other bandits, only killing the assassin. Which meant the assassin was a deadly foe. Haruka-kun must've decided that letting him live would have put all of us at risk… so he killed him.

He didn't hesitate anymore. We'd all seen it in his face after he visited the village that got destroyed. He didn't unleash his true potential until that moment. Before then, he joked about killing if necessary. But this was different. He really could take a life if he had to. After that visit to the village, he acquired a new zeal that didn't show up in stats. That's how he killed the greatest killer and exterminated the beastfolk hunters from the Theocracy. He killed so that nobody else had to die. And now, he was headed back to the front lines.

"So, he wants us to stay here in the defenses of the pseudo-dungeon, and go launch guerrilla strikes on the enemy by himself," Book Club President said.

For a moment, the room fell silent. Everyone shivered at the thought. We all saw images of damnation. No one was worse suited to the brutal battlefields of guerrilla warfare than Haruka-kun. Guerrilla warfare would place him square in the middle of hell. I mean, setting brutal, vicious traps at every stage of the path to Omui, hiding in gaps and launching murderous raids before vanishing back into the shadows, crushing the enemy piece by piece…*those poor soldiers don't stand a chance!*

"It's technically dangerous for Haruka-kun too," Vice Rep A said.

"It's a good strategy, to hit and run, but he'll be surrounded and defenseless if the enemy finds him."

"Defenseless besides Angelica-san and Slimey, you mean?"

"Those poor, poor enemy soldiers!"

We would only get in the way of guerrilla tactics. That was blatant. By comparison, Haruka-kun would struggle in toughing out a siege. "Struggle" in that his only option to defend would be to brutally destroy the entire enemy force, yes, but that left the rest of us vulnerable.

"He could easily escape a situation where they're overwhelmed with numbers, right?"

"Well, depends how overwhelmed you mean."

"And a siege could mean huge casualties."

"Yeah, you're right…"

Yup, Haruka-kun was the man for the job. He was practically made for the joy of guerrilla warfare.

“I don’t want him to go on his own, but I really just can’t imagine anything going wrong,” I said.

“All I can picture is the pain and misery of the enemy soldiers,” said Vice Rep A.

“I mean, like, Haruka-kun is, y’know, supremely suited for guerrilla tactics IMO,” said Vice Rep B. “He’s so good at sneaking and stuff.”

“He has so many espionage skills, you almost forget about them all!”

“I’m pretty sure guerrilla warfare to him will mean attacking the heart of the enemy’s forces head on.”

“Don’t tell me he’s gonna try to wipe out the entire force by himself?!”

The problem was this world. There were too many things we still didn’t know. Magic, skills, items. If the enemy was the church, that meant there was a strong possibility they had some sort of holy magic weapon. But we didn’t know. The unknown was the most frightening enemy of all.

If you could stop Haruka-kun’s movements, you could easily kill him. He had no defenses or resistance—he relied entirely on his evasion to get through battles. He just killed before the enemy killed him. He didn’t stand a chance in a fair exchange of blows.

So any item that froze time on the battlefield meant instant death. Even Angelica-san would be in trouble then. Long-range weapons were also dangerous, or ranged physical attacks. Haruka-kun had tricked and swindled his way through these situations so far, but he had plenty of weaknesses.

“You’d think that a holy magic weapon would rely more on direct attacks or defenses…”

“Yeah, it’s still a problem.”

The rest of our class could handle attacks. So even if we were just there to protect him, we wanted to be there. Even if we would just get in the way, we had the right to wish we were by his side. Those three were just on a different level in terms of speed. Hit and run attacks at that speed—*those*

were bound to cause a wave of fantasy-world bullying. The enemy had no chance to sense their presences before all three of them came in and caused disaster.

"What about sending a few of us with them, whoever has the best chance of keeping up?"

"If they can help defend from a distance, maybe."

"The problem is the prince. He wants to hand Haruka-kun over to the nobles as a part of negotiations," said Book Club President. "Isn't he our real enemy?"

"Yeah, but…Haruka-kun doesn't understand what's going on, so that won't happen."

"Anyway, sending those three straight into the heart of the enemy… that's the best offense we could have, right?"

Handing Haruka-kun, Angelica-san, and Slimey over to the nobles would put them in the heart of enemy territory, where they could easily destroy the entire force. There they were primed to destroy the chain of command, erase all defensive measures, and start an all-out battle within enemy ranks…*the enemy is screwed.*

"Haruka-kun just wants to attack the enemy head-on, doesn't he?"

"What was the point of all our preparations, then?"

"He's going to bully the concept of war so hard that this whole world has no other choice but peace!"

Haruka-kun didn't fight. He destroyed. Utterly and brutally destroyed.

"Good thing he has Slimey with him."

"Yeah, with Angelica-san for offense and Slimey for defense, he's gonna be fine!"

"They're unstoppable together."

Slimey's endlessly changing, flashy attacks and his high-speed evasiveness caught most people's attention, but in reality, he was an unstoppable defensive force as well. For a monster so specialized for attacking, he made an impressively perfect, impenetrable guardian.

“We couldn’t even breach Slimey when we all attacked at once.”

“One does not simply break through Slimey!”

Even Angelica-san was nodding. So that was Dungeon Emperor-level enemy assessment.

“Haruka-kun will go in the end, won’t he?”

“For sure, even if we try to stop him.”

He’ll leave us behind again.

Even though we finally made it past level 100, we still couldn’t keep up with him. Still, we couldn’t leave the frontier defenseless. Somebody had to stay, and if Duke Omui went with Haruka-kun that meant it would have to be us. We had the pseudo-dungeon passes as well…forced upon us, but we had them.

But if Duke Omui decided to stay, then there should be no problem with us going with Haruka-kun. We could stand guard, even if we couldn’t participate in the guerrilla strikes. We could at least clear an escape route. That much we could do.

Right now, Duke Omui and the prince were having a meeting. Until they finished, we couldn’t finalize our strategy, but if we didn’t have plans of our own, we wouldn’t be able to respond in a pinch. If we couldn’t make a move immediately, then we’d have to think about training in nearby dungeons. Not being able to come up with a plan was the biggest problem.

The moment we got out of the bath, everyone broke out into a run. There was an emergency!

Don’t tell me, Murimuri Castle—we let our guard down!

He’d opened up a souvenir shop right here in Murimuri Castle and was selling manju! Stalker Girl was handling the register. The soldiers were in uproar. And the manju…were already sold out! (Bursts into tears.)

Haruka-kun didn’t want his inventory to spoil while he traveled. *So why didn’t he just sell them to us?!*

DAY 62

NIGHT

I conducted trials that failed but it was still worth it.

MURIMURI CASTLE

THERE WAS NO SUCH THING as going overboard with equipment when it came to war preparations. Just a slight edge could save your life, which meant that I had no choice but to accept orders. But this, this didn't have anything to do with war…did it?

"No way!" I protested. "Why would a bra need to be suited for land *and* water? Hang on, isn't that just a bikini?! Is changing clothes that much of a hassle for you? Are you some kinda amphibian? Although you *are* Fish Girl, which means your parents are fish. Are you even allowed on land? Although they do say that we all evolved out of fish that came on to the land, so I guess it's fine? Probably?"

"I'm not a fish *or* an amphibian!" she shouted.

If she wanted a bikini, then I could include water resistance as a part of my calculations, but that meant I would need to be with a girl in a dripping bra and underwear, which is definitely a bad situation for a teenage boy! And water resistance could make the bra slip off at any moment? Slipping off was bad enough, but dripping wet underwear was fatal!

Even if we decided to just make a bikini, that would already put me in the devastating situation of being alone with a teenage girl in wet underwear. *My sex appeal is gonna die by drowning!*

Nudist Girl didn't have any problems, but Fish Girl's boobs were quite big, which meant more water resistance. I could calculate it with enough tests, but big, dripping boobs would be a much, much harder test! I guess I needed to do the measurements for the bra and the bottoms first, though. *I can't just make my bras amphibious like that!*

"It would be really useful if I could swim in it, though," she said.

“Yeah, there are river monsters and whatnot in this world, so you wouldn’t want to lose your underwear! That would be so awkward for the monsters attacking you.”

I knew that I would need to make swimsuits for these two at some point. Well, I knew I would, but there wasn’t any pool or beach to swim at, and the only river was close to the monster forest. That was too dangerous. The goblins didn’t go into the river, and since they were level 100, they wouldn’t have any trouble fighting off the weaklings in that area. But they would be totally defenseless, especially against being given the slip! ’Cause if their bras slipped off, I’d be in for a lecture, right?

“I don’t even know what swimsuits are made out of, ya know?”

“Oh, we don’t know either,” they both said.

I didn’t know how to make them to begin with, or even what they were made out of. The materials probably weren’t water-resistant or water-repellant, so then what were they?

“Something that doesn’t absorb water and that dries quick,” Fish Girl said.

“The competitive swimsuits feel kinda floaty, too,” Nudist Girl said.

I’d heard that clothes got wet because the materials absorbed water. So…maybe water-repellant was the answer? Then something that quickly dried, so something with natural warmth to reduce chill.

“Then it can’t be transparent, either… And I should go with something a bit stretchy, I guess?”

Time to conduct trial after trial on Miss Armor Rep. Yeah, that sounded nice.

If I could use a coating of spellstone powder to create a water-resistant or water-repellant effect, then the job would be done in no time. But stretchiness was also a key factor here. Something too baggy would get pulled off by the water resistance. And since these two were serious swimmers, I could base the design on competitive swimsuits or school swimsuits. When you thought about it, competitive swimsuits would be best, but for some reason Nudist Girl requested a school swimsuit model?

“Sounds like the nerds have got a thing for school swimsuits, but if I ask them, they’ll just go off on a three-day rant. I won’t bother.”

“Why would *they* know that much about school swimsuits?!”

Come on, we’re talking about the guys who went off on a seven-day ramble about striped knee socks.

With that, I focused, sending Magic Hands to collect information while making my own consciousness retreat. That ‘information’ was pretty fatal to a teenage boy when it included full touch sensations. Then Supreme Thinking used Area Analyze to construct a three-dimensional model, which also provided some pretty tough geometry for a teenage boy to witness—I was in for an explosion tonight. I didn’t know if these observations were the greatest in all of history, but they were probably more than enough to raise Super Horny a couple of levels.

“Isn’t there anything you can do to make them lift or float? Fill it with air, or something?”

“It’s a magic bra, for crying out loud! Can’t you use magic to move them or something?”

“A teenage boy *will* lift those with his own hands, he shall never yield to air or magic!” I cried. “No, nothing shall trample my magical teenage daydream of scheming evil! Never!”

A magic-powered bra…something that could change size? Or merge with other bras?!

“But if I merge my five girls’ worth of bras into one bra, that would leave four without a bra, which would make it impossible for us boys to fight while being so distracted on the battlefield… Nope, there’ll be no bra merging today!”

I couldn’t believe I’d already made five. With Nudist Girl and Fish Girl, that made seven. I couldn’t say that I had gotten used to it. With all of the *ooh*s and *ahh*s and *eep*s and *ugh*s and *urgh*s and *ack*s and *aww*s and *urm*s and *aah~ahhn*s and *kyaa*s, how could anyone get used to that? *Nor do I have any intention to! Urmf* was one thing, but *aah, ahh* and *ohhh*—now, I could get down with those! *And Miss Armor Rep, please don’t part your fingers to give me a peek at the exact moments of moaning, okay? I know*

you're doing it on purpose! Her fingers always seemed to move at the perfect time. She was trying to catch me in a lecture trap!

Then for measuring the bottoms, I overcame all of the *eek*s and various trials that awaited me there and made it to the final adjustments, by which point Nudist Girl and Fish Girl's faces and bodies were bright red. It looked like they were going to start blowing steam out of their ears? Did I accidentally invent some steam engines?

"After some final adjustments, I can whip these up no problem," I said. "I know the measurements, so I can make you sample swimsuits if you don't mind a trial product…how about it? I can only do a competitive swimsuit design or a school swimsuit design, but I need you to explain the details to me first."

"Really?!"

They were more happy about that than the underwear. They had been lying on the floor, gasping for air, but as soon as I said the word 'swimsuit,' they shot upright. I guess they really did want to swim. This must have been the longest they had ever gone without swimming, now that I thought about it. They used to swim literally every day. Fish Girl's mother and father were fish, after all!

"Can you please cut it with that nonsense story?!"

I tried making a design based on their drawings for the time being. I didn't know if the one with the open back was the competitive model or the school model, but I gave it a shot. Even stockinette fabrics weren't elastic enough and ended up stretching out. So I needed a tighter knitting pattern… *maybe this?* Yeah, that fabric seemed kinda bathing suit-esque?

"Now try it on. I'll also get some buckets and water, so try getting them wet and let me know how it feels. I haven't made this kinda thing before, so I have no idea how it'll turn out, you know? Also, please don't tell the police that a teenage boy just made female swimsuits?"

They both got changed right away, and I made some final adjustments with Magic Hands. Miss Armor Rep didn't have to cover my eyes anymore now that they were dressed. With the final check, I wondered if maybe the material was too tight? The, err, prominent parts of their

bodies were…ahem. Maybe the fabric was too thin? *I'm pretty sure my blindfold shouldn't have quit at this stage?*

"It fits perfectly. And the design is just as expected. I think I can swim in this…"

"Yeah, it feels good! I want to go swimming already! It's perfect, really!"

Were they sure? Why did I feel like something was wrong? I had prepared some 10-foot buckets and filled them with water. They jumped in and started to swim. It was a bit cramped, but given the constraints of the room, I didn't have much choice.

"It's like a pool!"

"No, I can't do a pool," I said. "It wouldn't fit in this room, and stuff?"

I only filled the buckets with a foot of water, but the two girls went in splashing and rolling and practicing their strokes. Since they were clothed, I wasn't blindfolded any more, but…my brain was starting to fry. *I underestimated the power of swimsuits,* I thought. They were for swimming, so that meant they got *wet!* If I had to gather my thoughts and summarize them…they were shrinking and see-through? They were going completely transparent and shrinking drastically. Yep, much smaller when wet. This *sure was* a fabric that shrank when wet…and became see-through. I didn't know that before. Now I did. For the time being, I called my blindfold back. This was already an X-rated scene, way too perilous for a boy of my stature. Why was Miss Armor Rep so bad at covering my eyes properly, though? The cover-up was late to begin with, I suppose.

*"Whaaat the *#*$@*&$^#!"*

(Lecture intensifies.)

I was getting glared at. Ah, the revival of my glared-at days! Fish Girl glared at me with teary eyes, but listen, that was how it went with trial products. I revived my design efforts. *Can't beat a teary-eyed glare!*

This fabric's propensity to absorb water, shrink, tighten, and turn completely see-through was causing a serious dripping-wet teenage girl incident. I needed to make the fabric itself water resistant and repellant, and then come up with some way to knit the fabric to prevent it from shrinking and preserve the fit. The only thing to do was try out a few different versions.

I had to try two different fabrics to address the see-through, ahem, issue. I observed the specific degree of shrinkage and transparency and fed the information to Supreme Thinking for a round of calculations. *I didn't realize school swimsuits were so high-tech?* Supreme Thinking combined multiple elastic weaving techniques to create additional trial products. I perused them for the optimum level of comfort.

This should be perfectissimo, I thought. I tried five different types of cloth, dumping them in the water to test them out. This was the best one yet. I took the cloth and cut and sewed it into the bathing suit designs.

Time for the testing phase. I prepared my personal blindfold Miss Armor Rep to cover my eyes in case of failure, but I had the feeling it would be okay this time. Her eye-covering ability was far from okay, but the calculations this time were far more favorable. I added a coating of magic powder as well, so these bathing suits should be better than anything back in the real world.

Splish splash, splish splash.

"This is amazing! It feels great!"

"You could sell these back in Japan! It's perfect for a swimmer!"

I could sell them, sure, but I'm not so sure about doing the measurements? I sank to the floor just thinking about the prospect. I definitely didn't want to measure male swimmers. Hard pass there! Having to conduct such thorough measurements on nude men…the thought hurt my very soul.

"I think you did it, Haruka-kun!"

"It's easy to move in, and the fabric doesn't seem to be absorbing water at all!"

"I think it might be better than competitive swimsuits?"

No surprise there. I mean, skills and magic were probably banned for competitive swimming. The fabric I came up with didn't absorb any water or cause friction to slow you down when swimming. *Great! Next up is late-night swimwear activities with Miss Armor Rep.* And that meant with the first fabric, not the last one! That one was perfect in a different sense—the teenage-boy sense of perfect! Plus, I made these giant buckets…I think this might be time for lotion to enter the scene—again, in another teenage boy sense. *The Battle of the Buckets is about to begin!*

I was glad that Nudist Girl and Fish Girl liked their new swimsuits. Now they could swim, so of course they were happy. They left cheerfully, still in their swimsuits. Please don't bring up the vision of dripping-wet girls in swimsuits in the teenage-boy sense, ya know? Not in public!

I mean, those swimsuits were incredibly tight. Teenage-boy problems were epically hard nowadays. Like, literally. They left in great cheer, but I

wasn’t so sure about two teenage girls walking around the castle in dripping wet bathing suits.

After that came the dripping wet battle of the late-night buckets, with much shrinkage and transparency and swimsuit battles. What a wonderful occasion. *This is heaven!* And, as expected, she got incredibly mad at me. But I engraved the battle deep into my soul. *I will never forget the day of this legendary war!*

DAY 63

MORNING

Even though I won the Battle of the Buckets I got my buckets confiscated in a battle?

MURIMURI CASTLE

IN THE BATTLE OF THE BUCKETS, I fought valiantly to the very end, *splish*ing and *splash*ing. When I woke up, it was morning (lecture time). *What fine glares today!*

But after such glorious glares, I was face to face with some old dude again. Oh, it was Mr. Meridad's advisor with a message. Well, the contents didn't matter. The old dudes were still hashing things out.

"So, the old dudes are still in their meeting and discussing stuff—I guess nobles and royals just love meeting rooms. Are they gonna settle down there?"

Jiggle jiggle?

Hey, if they liked the meeting room so much, they could keep using it! I'd prefer they just make a decision, though. If they decided, then afterward they could keep meeting as much as they wanted. How about it?

At least for today, the decision wasn't settled. If they repeated this ten more times, then the enemy would arrive here before they finished their meeting. Wouldn't that defeat the whole purpose of meeting in the first place? And the girls had already gathered for a meeting of their own. Why did everyone like meetings so much? And why was I never invited?

"Well, there are some untouched dungeons around here, so how about some raiding and training?" Class Rep proposed.

"Agreed!"

I supposed there was nothing else to do at Murimuri Castle, and you could never have enough dungeon items.

“Haruka-kun, you man the fort while we’re gone,” Class Rep said. “The duke wants to talk to you, and the princess too. You stay here.”

“Hang on, you’re leaving me out, as in ostracizing me, as in leaving me behind, as in making me a shut-in loner with no job to do?! Wait a second, those are my exact titles, but never mind—that’s bullying! It hurts!”

Jiggle jiggle.

There was nothing to spend money on at Murimuri Castle. Still, I could always spend cash down the line. Not to mention Slimey’s food costs were dizzying. I wanted to go to the dungeon as well. Above all else, I didn’t want to be stuck here with the old dudes! I mean, the place was just overflowing with old dudes at the moment. This place was practically boasting about its old-dude-to-babe ratio from every single room in the building. If the princess and the sexy female knights weren’t there, I probably would’ve burned the place to the ground… *Although, I’m making preparations to do that anyway?*

“The duke says you have to be here, got it?”

“And manning the fort means manning *this* fort, or castle, rather, so don’t think about going anywhere else.”

“Stay right where you are!”

What did the princess want with me? Was she going to invite me to go bandit hunting again? It kinda sucked, but at least I made some petty cash off of it. Not as much as I would in a dungeon, though. Bandits didn’t really have much cash, and their equipment and weapons were shoddy. Those old dudes were nothing compared to spellstones. Just a bunch of broke geezers who didn’t even have any treasure. Yeah, dungeons were way better.

“We’re starting from the first floor, so there’s, like, not even that much money to make,” said Vice Rep B.

“Yeah, that’s why I made those awesome shirts, ya know?”

“*There’s no need to make any new products, okay?!”* the girls hissed.

Even the wristbands sold out. You were amazing, “I ❤ FRONTIER” line.

“Three dungeons between two parties, I suppose we can probably get down to the middle floors?”

“Let’s just focus on training.”

“Yeah, I wanna get more used to fighting.”

They checked their items and planned how to work together. The individual party leaders had powerful items, but that made the cooperation more difficult. Especially Class Rep’s Thunderbolt Chain Whip, which made coordination near impossible with its overwhelming strength. The five meatheads all had Wrathful Zweihänders, but who cared about them? Odds were high they had no clue how to use swords in the first place. Those swords were nearly two meters long, so at least they couldn’t throw them, being so heavy and all.

“We’ll be back by tonight, so if you’re free tomorrow, I might ask you to check the hidden rooms for us,” said Class Rep.

“Well, the upper floors don’t tend to have much. It’d be a waste if you didn’t, though.”

We were still short on gloves, boots, cloaks, and accessories, so mid-floor dungeon items would be useful. A single find could change the course of a battle. When prioritizing safety and getting stronger, dungeons were a top priority.

Everyone said *see ya later*, and I said *see ya later* right back. Why were they all smiling like that? Something was up.

“Huh…I don’t have anything to do until they get back, so I may as well make a giant bucket—nope, not that! I swear, I mean, ya know, for washing! It’s all cloudy and stuff today, so, I mean, with a big bucket you can wash so many clothes, right? Although…I only have to wash one set of villagers’ clothes? Ya know? Ya feel me? For realsies?”

As the class departed, Class Rep got pissed and confiscated my bucket! *No, not my sweet, lotioned-up, dripping-wet bucket!* Well, I had four other buckets, but one of them was gone now!

It was all worth it, though. Swimming, *splish*ing and *splash*ing with a sticky, dripping, see-through, lotioned-up, skintight swimsuit…can’t beat that!

Her smooth, white skin had been sticky and wet. The swimsuit clung to her firm body, with all of the magnificent curves dripping and glistening, sending the soaking wet dreams of a teenage boy swelling to glorious proportions… It was the ultimate fantasy adventure into a wet, sticky, jiggly, sexy body, and I persevered to experience *everything!*

Although I was getting glares, so I couldn't finish my thought. I considered doing my side job, but then Maid Girl showed up. And in her ultra-powerful, effect-endowed sexy maid outfit, too! I think some lotion would suit this bare-backed gap-ridden maid outfit very nicely—wait, do I sense an iron ball behind me? I quickly wiped the thought from my mind. *Please no morning star first thing in the morning?* A fearsome presence towered outside of my window, just behind me. Please go away? Miss Armor Rep *really* liked her morning star. *And if she kept using it, maybe she'd gain proficiency in it. Any day now.*

"Lord Haruka, the princess would like to see you. Would you dine with her this morning? If you say no, I'll stab you."

"Well, I won't say no, but please don't stab me if I happen to say 'no' on the way over. And if the only options are to go or get stabbed, then you're not exactly asking, are you? Why didn't you just say, 'come dine with her or get stabbed?' That would've made the point very clear. And with your sexy maid outfit, it's not like I wouldn't have gone with you. Ya know?"

I decided to do her the favor. It seemed like the threatened stabbing was incoming, so I quickly followed her out. The favor of witnessing the full glory of the sexy maid outfit from behind! The (I) outfit (want) was (to) practically (have) bare (sex) from behind!

I dodged the morning star that threatened to strike my own back and went rolling and tumbling around the ground—i.e. I followed the sexy maid outfit. Morning stars were incredibly dangerous in these cramped hallways! She chose this location to have the best chance of hitting her target!

"Why does the ultra-safe fortress protect everyone but me?!"

Maid Girl glared at me. Did she want me to be more polite or something? All Japanese kids learn how to use polite speech in school, so I

could turn it on if I wanted to. Obviously? Maid Girl was such a worrywart.

"I hath heard that thou hast offered the splendiferous honor of summoning me into thy presence, thy most highly upon high Highness, and now I hath trod nigh unto thy almighty personage? And I'll sell ya a discount Frontier Specialty Frontier-Brand Wooden Sword if ya like, just gimme three seconds 'n' junk? Can even make it dual swords! Ya dig?"

I sold. And I prospered! But I also got glared at? Wait a second, Maid Girl was enjoying herself? It did take more than three seconds, but I threw in a second sword. *Look at this excellent service! All for a rip-off?* Something smelled fishy.

"Lord Haruka, do you intend to turn yourself over to the nobles? Why would you do such a thing? This crisis must be addressed by royalty alone: meaning myself and the first prince, in this instance. You must not feel any responsibility for this crisis, Lord Haruka. Please reconsider your actions!"

Is she telling me not to peddle to the nobles' army? She just bought one of my wooden swords! If she told me I couldn't sell them to the nobles that would just be anti-noble discrimination. Shouldn't it be her duty to ensure equal treatment under the law of the king?

"Princess Girl, what are you gonna do? The old prince dude wants to go negotiate with the nobles, and if you went too that'd put the entire royal line right in front of the enemy, know what I mean? Old Prince Dude seems like he wants to finish the negotiations one and for all, but do you think that's possible, Princess Girl?"

"I-I have a plan!"

I sure hoped she did, if she was telling me not to go peddle!

"Are you trying to infiltrate the enemy ranks and take out the first prince? Maybe you could kill some of the other nobles too, but that'd just be throwing your life away, y'know?"

"…" (Sweating.)

I *knew* she was another meathead!

"Even if you kill the first prince and the major noble houses, you must realize that nothing would change? You'd literally just be throwing

away your life for no gain."

"B-but…but…even if it's pointless, I am the princess. I am of royal blood," she replied. "No matter how pointless or futile it may be, even if there is a slightest chance of victory it is my duty to sacrifice my life for the cause. If I end up perishing in the attempt, perhaps it will have been for naught, but I cannot at any cost ask you, Lord Haruka, as a completely unconnected individual, to go into enemy territory! That in itself would be irresponsible as a princess, and I will not deal such a fatal blow to my pride! It is the destruction of the good name of our family that would be pointless!"

Princess Girl left the room in tears, leaving Maid Girl to negotiate. I guess she was in no condition to talk things through. No matter how prideful she was, no one could remain calm about the prospects of walking to their death. Even as a Princess Girl, even as Sword Queen Girl, even as Peerless Knight Girl, even as Half-Naked Heave-Ho Girl, an eighteen-year-old girl would be terrified to walk to her death. Sooo…why wouldn't she just quit? No matter what I said, she was determined to see things through.

"So, I guess this is what happens to Princess Girls… Jeez louise!"

Jiggle jiggle?

Even the Old Prince Dude was determined to never give up. To keep at it, to persist, to crawl through dirt and mud and drag himself through all manner of obstacle… *That would probably make things worse, though?*

What they didn't realize was that throwing away their lives meant the end for the rest of us. Those poor, struggling royals. These pathetic monarchs. They had nothing but pointless pride.

Still, these prideful monarchs were willing to drag themselves through the mud if need be. That's why Mr. Meridad preferred to make a move. Even if sending the frontier army into the conflict just raised the curtain on a new war, Mr. Meridad was willing to fight for the royals. Even if it led to the downfall of the domain, he would choose the kingdom over his lands. It made sense why the conference never ended. There was no solution. And things could get a whole lot worse than the worst-case scenario of a never-ending meeting.

DAY 63

NOON

The mountain golems can actually bow but that would risk a landslide.

MURIMURI CASTLE

MEETING ROOM

THE WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO we had imagined crumbled into something far worse. This was more disastrous than anything we could have conjured. In but a single command, everything had been flipped on its head; all our prior discussions became meaningless.

"There's been an insurrection in the capital! The rebels have proclaimed that the second prince is the true king, and the gates to the capital have been closed!"

The frontier army had the least number of troops, and by no small amount. Enough that the frontier force could not risk splitting down into further divisions. The only hope for Omui's victory was and had always been to kill the enemy generals.

"What of the health of the king?"

"We have no news."

But if we couldn't defeat the enemy from the front, then I was stuck in Omui. Its army was too weak otherwise. With these numbers, the army could protect the frontier. That was the power of Murimuri Castle and the pseudo-dungeon—it enabled us to protect Omui for the very first time, but it was also the only option we had. We couldn't fight two enemies at once. We lacked the manpower.

One third of first prince's force was on the way to Omui: subtracting the forces mustered by the second prince, that meant he should still have a third of his force left. Besides that, there was the Imperial Guard stationed

at the border and the various local noble armies. We could assume all of those to be our foes.

Diorelle claimed to have a hundred thousand soldiers, but the scale of the army was more like fifty thousand, plus twenty thousand in local militias and guards that you would be hard-pressed to call soldiers. The remaining thirty thousand were villagers and difficult-to-muster militias that the kingdom could call upon if necessary. In essence, that meant one corps of thirty thousand controlled by the kingdom, and one of twenty thousand by the nobles. And the kingdom's army had already split.

Meanwhile, Omui's army was a regiment of two thousand five hundred. An order of magnitude smaller. We had no chance against them. If we fought, we would fall.

I could not split our force. That would mark our defeat. If we could not concentrate our numbers, we would be crushed by the enemy's overwhelming numerical advantage. We could not involve the adventurers' guild either, not in a losing fight.

"Because the elite guard led by Princess Shalliceres attacked the pseudo-dungeon, they have not yet returned to the capital. That is the only bright spot. This means that the strength of the Imperial Guard remains at the border."

The Third Division had already joined the ranks of the first prince's army. But was the Second Division, a defensive troop, on the side of the second prince? Then there was the Fourth Division, a Royal Army only in name, consisting of mostly combat engineers and supply troops—that troop appeared to have joined the First Division. The numerical disadvantage was only the beginning.

"Your Highness's closest allies remain in the palace guards of the Imperial Guard, but those still number two thousand at most. Then the regiment led by Princess Shalliceres is three thousand if we could add them all to our cause. Then with the two thousand five hundred soldiers in our army, that doesn't even add up to ten thousand."

"And their forces have already gathered. Furthermore, if the Theocracy has dispatched soldiers of their own…those would number well over thirty thousand."

The combined corps of the church-aligned nobles and the first prince together formed the “Frontier Reclamation Army.” Those forces would number about twenty thousand. With the Imperial Guard’s second division on their side, the second prince’s rebellion was a menace.

“It is a three-way deadlock, but with drastic differences in might. Still, now the first prince’s faction doesn’t have a home base. They’ve lost their advantage.”

“We should not overlook the strength of the noble and church forces that back him. One disadvantage they face—the larger the force, the larger the requirements are for support and supplies.”

Which meant that they would have to either press on toward the frontier or turn back to the capital.

“What is the second prince thinking?! The king, my brother—what has happened to him?! This is treachery!”

The chancellor was confused. It was no mystery, however. The representative of the kingdom was now in Omui, and the second prince must have counted upon that opening. They wanted the first prince and the nobles to move away from the capital, then strike while the chancellor was out. They had been scheming for this position from the start.

“If the first prince, the church, and the nobles are able to conquer Omui, then the first prince shall become the supreme ruler and the second prince will lose his life. He was waiting for the chance to strike. He may have had no choice,” I said.

“That must be the case,” my advisor agreed. “He wouldn’t take such drastic actions on a whim.”

We needed the second prince’s support, but there was no hope of cooperation. Right now, between the representative and the princess, we had two potential heirs in one place. The two with the smallest military forces, at that. We were still in the most dangerous position.

“Your Highness,” said my advisor, “we have no choice but to await additional news. If we move now, we shall expose weak points. There is no benefit in trying to gain the upper hand. Let us wait. I’m sure the king is safe.”

“Damn,” he grunted. “Under my incompetence, Diorelle will…”

Waiting may have been to our advantage, but other nations could still make a move. It would be great news for the first prince and the nobles if the First Division were to march to the border. They could not hold their position for long. No matter how elite they were, they could not hold out without reinforcements.

Then, outside of our never-ending meeting, there was Haruka-kun. After being told the same information we were dealing with now, he simply responded, “Sucks, don’t it?” without even a hint of surprise. He had expected this situation, in other words. He had anticipated the appearance of the second prince’s forces, which no one else could have predicted. “Sucks,” indeed.

From his muttering, the only other words that I could pick out were, “Which is next?” So there was more to come. We could not dilly-dally in this meeting forever. “Next” was coming, and measures needed to be taken. We were just killing time.

But buried within additional mutterings, there were answers. “The problem is the second prince’s backing,” he said. “If the first is with the church and the nobles, then what of the second?” He had a point. If we made a move without understanding the royals’ motivations, we could corner ourselves.

“Tsk…the merchant alliance, is it?”

Technically they weren’t a nation, but merchants’ associations that were more or less equivalent to a country. They had their own armies and their own land.

These nations of large merchant conglomerates opposed the church but worked together to promote the slave trade. It was a country that was not a country. The Merchant Kingdom.

“On the surface, they fight back against the church’s monopoly over spellstones and magic tools, but they work together with the Theocracy to attack beastfolk nations and sell them as slaves. But in this case, they’re fighting.”

“But Haruka-kun was just talking about which prince would net the most profit. He said we could merely sell the second prince to the

Theocracy for an ample profit, or the other prince to the merchants and profit either way?"

The Merchant Kingdom despised the way both the church and Omui controlled spellstones and magic tools, hence their support of the second prince's rebellion. It was an attempt to upset the Church's monopoly. We could use his failure for our own gain, by selling him out to the Church.

"We're supposed to have outlawed slavery in this kingdom, but…"

Indeed. There was still institutional slavery in this kingdom. For the most part, it mostly constituted temporary live-in apprenticeship.

"In Diorelle, permanent slavery where the slave becomes the complete private property of the master should not exist. And beastfolk should be respected as brethren and equals under the law. However…"

"The second prince intends to sign a secret agreement and put human rights in the past, does he?"

In which case, perhaps the second prince was just a pawn to get the kingdom to sign such an agreement. And if he controlled the capital, the place with the strongest defenses, it would be extremely difficult to stop them.

"This is getting out of control indeed."

Things had progressed in a far worse direction than our most dire predictions foresaw. But the boy, Haruka-kun, predicted it all, knew all, and prepared for all. If the boy and his friends were willing to remain behind in Omui, I could send the army. But at some point we were sure to fall.

"That explains why he's trying to go on his own…"

To go into the heart of the first prince's army—I could not let him do this! The quarrel was among the royals and nobles. But we were in a quagmire, an absolute impasse. That boy had a way of cutting through those.

"There is no longer any point in trying to convince Lord Musjix," I sighed.

"He is as stubborn as they come," my advisor said. "He was prepared to throw away his life."

At first, only the boy could see it. The boy saw something in his eyes, something only he could understand.

They say that strength creates its own possibilities. But that boy, despite his weakness, overcame the Ultimate Dungeon, a dungeon alleged to have had the power to destroy the entire continent. It was only human that the prince failed to comprehend how that weak boy possessed more possibilities than the rest of us combined. You might read that proverb in reverse—the boy's limitless possibilities created his incredible strength.

Here, I stretch the limits of my understanding. You might say that it would be considerably easier to make a mountain bow before you than to comprehend that boy.

DAY 63

NOON

A battle between a maiden's secrets and the kingdom's mysteries is about to begin?

MURIMURI CASTLE

MASS CONFUSION! The first prince's faction was headed this way, and the second prince's division had holed up in the capital. Mr. Meridad and Princess Girl were raring for charges of their own.

"Regardless of human relationships or international relations, or ideals, or anything, the first prince has gotta come this way 'cause he's got no cash," I said. "If he doesn't do anything, he's got huge losses, and anyway, the Merchant Kingdom made a move to have the second prince's group take over the capital. It's simple, get it?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Simply put, the "Frontier Reclamation Army"—the church-aligned nobles, the first prince, and the Imperial Guard's third division—would not be retreating.

"They didn't even reclaim the frontier from the monster forest but now they're here to force a little peace on us? I'll gladly crush them and reclaim their souls instead."

Jiggle jiggle!

Normally, a rebellion would mean the nobles against the king. But the church only needed the kingdom for the frontier. That meant they were focused on us. It was clear who was really in charge.

"If they fracture it's all good, and we'll be able to tell their next moves based on who's in charge…"

Wiggle wiggle.

Princess Girl wanted to lead a charge against both sides. Even if it was a hopeless situation, the kingdom hadn't given up their hope for

survival. The royals were prideful and determined to preserve peace for the commoners. Even if they died, they wanted to preserve the kingdom by doing so. They wanted to put an end to this war.

"Look, I get where they're coming from," I sighed, "but they really won't quit, eh?"

Jiggle jiggle.

They had already made their decisions. If fighting was the only option, they wanted to fight until the very end. All they had was their fighting prowess…*I guess*?

"Which means that it's training time, *boom de la boom de la boom*! I did fight Princess Girl before, but I was too distracted by the magnificence of the sexy dress to watch her technique much, so I haven't properly witnessed her battle prowess. We've only done practice drills, and I was staring at the dress the entire time, ya know?"

I didn't stand much hope of paying attention with the dynamite combo of Princess Girl + Maid Girl vs. Miss Armor Rep.

"Wh-what?" protested Princess Girl.

"In experimental terms, you gotta solve problems and get stronger and stuff. I mean I can't say that there are no inappropriate feelings involved, but if my inappropriate feelings lead to better feelings than those feelings, then they're acceptable in and of themselves, right? Which means it's whacking time!"

I didn't need to *look* to see what happened, but I simply had to witness the dynamic (dynamite) battle (body) with my own eyes! So strong. And so sexy!

"I can't even touch her!"

Her fighting style was orthodox. Nothing flashy, just straightforward, relentless sword attacks. So, she was well trained in simple attacks. An honest, just approach was logical…she was the princess, so, duh! And then there was Maid Girl, who launched nothing but tricky, flashy attacks from the shadows. Together they were an ultimate duo that fought in perfect harmony. Even if their cooperation crumbled, they could instantly adapt and respond when their tactics got shaken.

She was a blade of war; an army of one. Slaying ruthlessly, fearlessly, no matter who the enemy was. That's why she was the Sword Queen.

In this case, however, her opponent happened to be Miss Armor Rep. Her queenly sword never found its mark, and even Maid Girl got hit the moment she launched her surprise strikes from the shadows. The drill turned into a game of whack-a-maid.

"Yah! Yah! Yah! What is this power?!"

"The two of them are just about a perfect matchup against Class Rep and the other girls, I'm guessing! If I got them dressed up in equally strong equipment, this could be quite the match, ya feel me?"

Nod nod.

Sword Queen Girl and Maid Girl were specialized and adapted for battlefield combat. But Class Rep and the girls were level 100+ with cheat skills.

This was optimal, ideal training: the two of them faltered in pursuit of Miss Armor Rep, taking blows as they repeated reckless attacks.

Training here meant *beating*, of course. Their recent diets were taking effect very nicely in the form of nice, dynamite bodies: narrow waists, rounded hips, and bouncing, explosive, jiggling…*urf, unghhhh!*

"I-I was talking about sword technique, obviously! Dual morning star combat is off limits for training, 'kay?! You can't have me seeing stars in the morning for narrating the scene as it plays out, I just got a bit off track, that's all…and it was just a slip of the tongue! Huh? I was pumping my fist? Oh, was that when I said the bit about 'wet, sticky lotion dripping off the round, swelling thighs'—oh, I messed up! That was supposed to be 'get cocked, then, with a flicking motion like a gun, aim for the round thighs,' ya —aaarfgh!" *Oh my stars, please no more morning lectures (beatings), please have mercy!*

It was supposed to be training for Princess Girl and Maid Girl, but even I got some training…er, beating. It goes without saying, but it was a completely one-sided mashing out of which I did not gain a single iota of useful experience besides pain.

“The Princess is incredible, powerful, wonderful. Make me your pupil!”

Huh? After attacking Princess Girl, Miss Armor Rep seemed strangely attached to her. Now they linked arms, snuggled each other, and patted each other and whatnot throughout the day. I’d like to join in, but that was problematic for multiple reasons. Yeah, especially since that morning star was still in her hand!

“Hey now, nothing wrong with some hot girls being BFFs, but why are you pointing that spiked iron ball directly at my face? And why are you looking at her like that, Princess Girl? Is this like a sexy same-gender senpai sorta situation or something? I mean, you’re, like, touching her…and it’s kinda hot!”

They said they took baths together too—there was a real danger! A yuri might break out! I had to cultivate this deadly danger at all costs! *Should I prepare some more lotion?*

“Maid Girl, are you just gonna let this pass? Wasn’t it prohibited to do sexy stuff to the royal princess and whatnot?”

Maid Girl is just averting her eyes altogether! Yeah, this was definitely yuri-diculously out of bounds! *A new royal secret has been born.*

“Forget *Maria-sama ga Miteru* a.k.a *Maria Watches Over Us*! She ain’t just watching over this, she’s friggin’ staring at it—she’s Yuri Princess Girl now! Let me friggin’ stare too!”

But now Miss Armor Rep had a tree branch in her hand, gesturing at me to come at her. From yuri to fury. We faced off, gripping our weapons and slowly closing the gap. Princess Girl was staring at Miss Armor Rep, eyes sultry, so I guess this wasn’t learning by observation, but yuri by observation? *What’s up with those bedroom eyes?!*

Miss Armor Rep attacked—I had to stop her before she made it to me. Move ahead of her movement, slice straight-on at full speed. But a blow came in on my right side before I arrived, and I went flying to the left.

“As predictable as always, ha ha!”

I dodged her inexplicable attack inexplicably, but now she was a step ahead. She came from the top-right, but I didn’t move. Clairvoyance

showed me that if I moved, she'd cut me apart. I observed the flow of her strength, the flow of her magic…I had to swing my tree branch to the upper right.

Our tree branches clattered against each other and rebounded. I sprinted away. Her branch came after me as, by one means or another, I observed her coming attacks and dodged them, sending back swings of my own.

Don't ask me how it worked! But I wasn't done for. Not yet. She predicted my use of Vanish and responded perfectly.

Anticipating feints like flowers snowing from the sky, outwitting the sudden vanishing fog. Her swordplay was peerless, anyone could see that. There was no way to best it. It was almost hilarious how the armies of the prince, nobles, and church combined stood no chance against her.

Entangle—I entangled myself in all the magic I could, activated all of my skills simultaneously. Revival kicked in right as my body started to constantly self-destruct, a cycle of Vanish and Teleport buffeting me forward.

"Ack!"

I can't do it. But I had to mix every available skill and spell, resulting in an absolutely incomprehensible chaotic dancing duel. She saw through it regardless—slowly, she cornered me. Even I had no idea what I was doing, I couldn't see the future of my own unpredictable movements, but she parried every move, blocked every swing, cut through them all.

In the midst of this raging dance of inexplicable, incomprehensible attacks, I activated it—*Life or Death.* I seized control of my orbiting body, launching myself forward in a slash, which Miss Armor Rep reciprocated—and as our blades met, I saw surprise flicker in her eyes. *I did it.* For the first time, for a single moment, I stopped her attacks. That had to be enough to pass. But my body couldn't bear the battle any longer.

Crumple.

"God *damn* that hurt!" I yelped. "Agonizing pain in every bone in my body! Every muscle severed apart in full-body exhaustion and MP emptiness! This isn't fair! I have to decide whether I destroy my body in the attempt to land a single hit, or get torn apart after!"

And yet I crossed swords with her, in a single slash. For an instant, I stopped her. Maybe all of this did have a purpose. Still, it was a pointless skill. I wasn't ever going to commit suicide like this in an actual battle, allowing my body to temporarily get smashed to a pulp like this.

Meanwhile, horny-eyed Princess Girl was watching Miss Armor Rep in a trance. I guess she liked to watch—maybe that's how she got her yuri fix. I made subtle adjustments to the revival of my body based on the sensations, and when I reached my limit, used Teleport to land a proper blow. I ought to study what just happened myself. Reworking Life or Death was crucial. *Now I just need to get my revenge in the Ultimate Battle of the Buckets tonight! Please!!*

I swear, my skills were pulling tricks on me. *Something else got mixed up in there, I guess?*

"All right, you two know how the battle rolls, right Princess Girl and Maid Girl? So now I'll make some tweaks to your equipment and make it better! Activate strategic tactics to strengthen and multiply sexiness!"

You could say the failed swimsuit trial of shrinkage and transparency sealed the deal. I was going to go for a fit so tight that it cut into them! With a 300 percent increase to transparency included, free of charge!

Looked like Princess Girl and Maid Girl were in for another whacking. This was their first time getting knocked out—and their eyes turned into gigantic Xs, of course. They had no strategy or tactics, much less plans. If the first prince and Princess Girl wanted to strike, then I'd just follow after them. We were headed for war either way.

Princess Girl had authority over the knights of the Imperial Guard. A group of knights specialized in protecting a female general meant that female knights were almost definitely involved—which meant that Princess Girl *should* have sexy female knight subordinates!

It was going to happen—a (sexy) battle of a (sexy) full battalion of (equipment-torn-off) female knights! I had to attend that! If I didn't witness that with my own two eyes, I'd defile the name of teenage boys everywhere! If you announced this scene to any teenage boy back in the world I came from, he would become the mightiest warrior in the realm for the honor of witnessing this rampaging rumble of boundless beauty! Equipment damage is like ambrosia to teenage boys!

That meant I might have to fix up the equipment of (sexy) female knights. I'd start an epidemic of bikini-armored female knights in this world! That would freeze the nerd lords long enough for me to easily wipe them all out, right?

DAY 63

AFTERNOON

They pursued me and reached out for me and crushed me in a ring around the rosie.

MURIMURI CASTLE

A SUBLIME SCUFFLE between monster and monster. In the midst of the serene and silent stillness, they battled in a whirling, silent dance. They soared across the ground, spinning and spiraling, locked in battle.

They faced off casually, wooden sticks in hand, loosely dangling by their sides. Then in a flash, stillness erupted into unfurling madness. A blazing battle.

They were monsters. That was the only way to put it. Their bodies moved gracefully, arcing like dancing swimmers. Their speed was on another level. They moved so fast, and yet it looked like they were hardly moving; it was as if they were slow but your eyes couldn't keep up, as if time itself had thickened and unfurled deep underwater.

"What is this…?"

The strongest killers in the world didn't stand a chance against them. If you took a step into their range, they would cut you apart before you knew what happened. Attacks designed for killing humans would come to them like clacking automatons. They were different. Those attacks were all fury.

Whether they were people or humanoids or monsters or just magic, their attacks bore no resemblance to anything else in this world: they were pure edge, sharpness itself. This had nothing to do with fighting, or killing, or protecting. Their blows were beyond human reason and comprehension. They were slashes in the purest possible form. Slashes so close to their essence that they became something different altogether. Every movement of their body was in service to the arc of the slash. They danced upon the very limit of swordplay.

That boy destroyed dungeons; he was a monster. But what was that girl? She obeyed the boy, but her might surpassed even his. Even from her previous battle with the princess, I could not comprehend her strength. All I could grasp was that she was strong.

I understood but one thing from watching this battle: only monsters can take on other monsters.

Saying they were strong wouldn't do it justice. Saying they were skilled would be merely sloppy. Calling them fast took too long to convey it justly. Complex would be too simple. Whatever words I attempted, the only one that fit was *monster*. Having undertaken assassin training myself, I understood how terrifying they were. You couldn't kill them. My sword would never reach them.

I was lucky that I lost only my sword, then. He was merely playing with me. If they had unleashed this on me—this tornado of limitless motion, this unstoppable, unbreakable, undefeatable force—I would be dead.

This surpassed human limitations. I would die in battle against them before I understood what was happening. They dodged with precision, beauty, and grace. While they danced in this impenetrable, inglorious frenzy, it would be a miracle to do so much as brush them in combat.

They lived in madness. Such happenings could only occur in a different realm, a realm that flung common sense out the window, a sword-flinging nightmare of flurries. It was hard to believe there were only two weapons. Such endless training, discipline, and preparations to shave off all excess to swordplay and swordplay alone. That was monstrous enough in itself.

The resulting clash was beauty to the point of cruelty, efficiency to the point of brutality, silence to the point of pain.

"Terrifying, and yet beautiful…" I whispered. "They're showing us their true power. I see. That you could win in a fight, that you could cut through ten thousand foes… What relentless swordplay!"

"Yes. The incomprehensible swordplay that she displayed to us was just her tempering her might to get down to our level."

Kill to serve as Her Highness's shield, slice to serve as her Highness's sword. That's what they were telling me. That if I was willing to throw away my life to protect her, then *kill* instead. They were showing me that what they could do was not possible for human beings to accomplish. We needed to become monsters ourselves.

Her Highness declared that she would not give up. Which meant that I could not give up, either. I finally understood. This was what it meant to not give up—this was what it meant to put your life on the line for something. There would be no dying, no giving up, no loss, no defeat. This was the true meaning of battle.

That was how a mere level 21 boy became unstoppable, and what he had to teach us. How to achieve strength beyond one's level, how to win despite one's weakness.

What a horrifying monster indeed, I thought. *What terrible pain he must've gone through to achieve such skill.*

What unfathomable dangers he must've suffered to achieve such refined and graceful movements. Cruelty and harshness and pain could only be defeated by truth. Therefore nothing but the broiling flames of hell itself, no, something beyond even that—a boundless pit of burning evil agony—could have given birth to such resolve.

He strode through the depths of boundless hell to be here now. At level 21, with his stats, he must've struggled against agony and horrors worse than any nightmare. No wonder he became a monster. To have brought forth such wondrous strength in spite of weakness, to have crossed fields of the murdered and destroyed for such strength. The ability to become so strong while remaining so weak was what made him into the creature before me.

"I need…to be stronger."

"Yes. Together."

I had nothing that I could say to him. Nothing could compare to the hell that he had overcome. Surrounded by companions with the might of heroes, the eyes of that boy still glistened with love. The weakest of them all. He had the stats of a mere villager, and yet he overwhelmed heroes, champions, the Frontier King, the Sword Queen. The might of

madness. He would not give in to even ten thousand foes. That was what he taught us today.

That when our hearts are yearning to scream out, *I can't, it's impossible, I've failed,* these cries are meaningless. Here was their answer. Her Highness gripped her sword with both hands. She saw it too—they showed us together. The mark we had to live up to.

I realized that at some point I had started to grip my own sword tightly as well. I'd become entranced by the will to win no matter what. A monster born of hell itself.

Their dance of blades. It spoke to us. *If you truly seek to protect the princess, then you must kill them all. You cannot throw away your life. You must kill; kill, and therefore protect.*

"They're mad."

That's right. They needed to be mad. They achieved the truest possible form of resilience. It made them beasts.

They were trying to protect someone, something, for the sake of others. They forced themselves to fight without loss or failure, and if at the end of that path lay monstrous forms…it meant that we did not yet know true struggle. Meanwhile, this boy hadn't even scratched the limits of his potential.

Risking your life meant nothing. What was the value of a lost life? But achieving this—that gave everything meaning, and made death meaningless in turn.

So we lifted our swords. We had achieved nothing yet. Certainly not the strength we needed. We needed strength to outpace death. Such strength flexed before our eyes. We couldn't give up anymore. Never again. No matter how far off it seemed, I'd reach that level. Even if I had to drag myself on all fours to get there.

I will not lower these hands, I thought, *never again, not for the rest of my life.*

Her Highness and I cried out in one voice, "Please, help us!"

If putting our lives on the line was not enough, then we had to keep reaching out toward this pursuit of life. Toward this boy. He was the only

one. I saw now why they cared for him this much, those heroic and almighty companions of this boy. They kept reaching out toward him, always and always.

In the hopes of standing alongside these two monsters. To defy the course of life and death. *They all reach out toward him,* I realized, *and will always do so.*

DAY 63

EVENING

I didn't know the show started, and I didn't even agree to participate. And yet I got thrown into the losing role just like that?!

MURIMURI CASTLE

WE SPLIT INTO three groups of two parties each and went exploring the nearby dungeons for a little training. Everyone made it to the 50th floor and killed the dungeon king there. After that, all that was left was to look for hidden rooms.

Everyone had dumb, awestruck looks on their faces. We were on our way back to the castle, but it didn't feel real. Not for any of us. It had taken so long for us to manage to kill dungeon kings. We got caught by tentacles, abandoned our chastity, and when we finally thought we won, Haruka-kun declared we'd failed over hotpot. Eventually, when all six parties came together as a legion, we managed to defeat a dungeon king on our own.

We beat a dungeon, together. We cleared a dungeon, together. And now we were on our way back, safe and sound.

"What the hell is this?!"

Our brand new equipment was devastatingly strong. In it, we overpowered the dungeon king. We lit its body on fire, shortening our fighting time, enabling us to topple the entire dungeon in half a day. That's how far we had come.

"We're getting stronger?"

"Definitely!"

"Yeah we are. I know we are!"

"We handled a dungeon king with two parties, no sweat!"

"It's quite the accomplishment."

But our objective was too far away, too far to catch up even if we tried. Even if we used Teleport, our mark would probably use Super-Speed to teleport further away… Our confidence collapsed in a heap. Still, our recent victories bolstered us. Tonight's training would surely pulverize that confidence into dust, but we deserved to celebrate now. *Because later, we're going to get knocked out.*

"With all our firepower, we're totally, like, slashing down our battle time!"

"Even with all of us together, we're still slow compared to that demonic duo…"

We can't compare ourselves to them! They don't raid dungeons, they smash them. Good girls and bad ones alike couldn't imitate them without paying the price. They brutalized dungeons.

Meanwhile, Kakizaki-kun's group was in a state of excitement. Maybe they had status ailments? They just kept repeating the same line over and over:

"These swords are cool! They're friggin' awesome!"

"So cool! So awesome!"

The Zweihänders had incredible destructive force, but they also had a destructive effect on their ability to form sentences. They debuffed Intelligence. It seemed like *cool* and *awesome* were the only adjectives left in their vocabulary.

But being able to defeat enemies in a single blow was a devastating advantage. They cut down the enemy numbers in the blink of an eye, creating a numerical advantage for us. Most of us had a lot of MP left. We could keep fighting if necessary.

"Now that we've got solid equipment, we barely even took damage!"

"Yeah, this bra makes it so easy to move!"

Those of us with bigger breasts had been seriously suffering. And the rest of the class…their suffering continued unabated. Anyway, yes, easier to move now. My boobs didn't get in the way at all, and my back never got tired. There was no chafing or any other sort of discomfort. When I was fighting, I didn't even notice the bra at all. It was the greatest bra in the

entire universe. Even science fiction couldn't devise a better bra. *And I can't wait to see the results of the booty shapewear!*

We had also raised our base defenses and strengthened the effects of our skills, so most of us finished the whole dungeon damage-less. That was serious growth. It all felt a little unreal, but there was no mistaking that we had gotten stronger. This is what Haruka-kun was hoping for all along. For us to have the strength to protect ourselves.

"We're finally over level 100, and we have great equipment, too."

"I'm reaching my true form!"

"Finally, right?"

Haruka-kun made it possible. We mastered what he gave us, and finally we could fight. Finally, we were strong. He did so much for us, protected us all this time, but we still hadn't become strong. It was pathetic. It was unacceptable. Well, we'd finally stepped up. We had every right to be happy.

When we got back to Murimuri Castle, there was a clamor. We quickly found the source.

"The second prince led an uprising in the capital?!"

"So the enemy of our enemy is also our enemy?!"

The kingdom soldiers were worried about the safety of their families. The frontier soldiers were worried about the state of the war. The kingdom was in chaos and starting to split apart altogether.

"But wouldn't it be to our advantage if the kingdom split up?"

"A diversification of forces?"

"You mean *division*?!"

A division of the enemy forces would be to our advantage, but if they were just getting more *diverse*…no, I didn't think that would help in the slightest!

"You could say that we have a whole new opponent now."

"What is this, a two-front war?"

"The representative of the kingdom hadn't even prepared for this?"

“And now he’s out of the kingdom, with us…”

A three-way deadlock was a bad situation. Both of them would prioritize wiping out the frontier. And both of them had way more soldiers than we did. Chances of solving this diplomatically were lower than ever.

“Well, it’s not like we have any say in the matter, so…dinner time! And bath time right after that!”

“Whooo!”

Yep, we just had to follow along. We just had to follow the dance of death whose path had been cleared by the scythe of a certain selfish somebody.

Then, we went to the training grounds to find Haruka-kun…only to see Princess Girl and Maid Girl knocked out, their eyes in obvious cross-mark shapes. Guess we were next in line? Had they just finished training, or were they knocked out from a post-workout overdose of manju?

“Angelica-san!” the girls called. “We just defeated a dungeon king!”

“Yeah! We’re stronger now!”

With that, a smile bloomed on Angelica-san’s face, so bright and ripe with spring delight that it nearly plucked free of her face like a flower petal and sailed into the wind.

A short while later: “Waaaaaah! We surrender!”

“Gwaaaaaagh! She’s too much!”

She did not have mercy on us.

Relying on our equipment gave us new weaknesses to exploit. She took advantage of our confidence. Now there was a pile of X-ed, raggedy girls in the corner, along with the pile of our carefully cultivated albeit woefully short-lived maidens’ confidence. It’d been completely pulverized into powder. Every single one of us was left with stars in our eyes.

“After our fire magic, I thought we stood a chance…”

“Yeah, we relied too much on our equipment.”

“We didn’t have any strategy at all.”

“This requires a meeting!”

Meeting time. There was a lot we needed to reflect on. We got high on our confidence, only to have it dropkicked to earth. It was for the best, too. It'd been a stern warning from Angelica-san.

"Going for a single, deciding blow is easy pickings for a smart counter."

"But I really did feel like the dungeon king was weaker this time!"

"That's only 'cause we're getting used to this overpowered Dungeon Empress!"

At some point, we started relying too much on our weapons to brute force the bosses. The strength of weapons and levels weren't what really mattered. That's why we got beat up. We recognized that we couldn't forget caution and aggression; true strength wasn't about weapons, it was about self-control.

Our ultimate unbeatable instructor taught us an ultra-strict, unimpeachable lesson, and we were stronger for it. We couldn't give up now. We could still get better.

Angelica-san told us that no matter how much he got beat up, Haruka-kun stayed strong. In order to defeat a powerful opponent, you had to overpower them…which meant Angelica-san was technically the strongest. But she said that kind of strength was meaningless. Haruka-kun was the only one who had killed the unkillable, after all.

That was the *truest* meaning of strength. Something beyond what even the powerful Angelica-san was able to do. An otherworldly strength resided in the heart of the weakest, strongest person of all.

"In that sense, Haruka-kun technically qualifies as the strongest of us all! Or weakest, craziest, mightiest. Feistiest?"

"But that candidate for the strongest, weakest, craziest, run-and-hide-iest, spiciest is at risk of getting caught up in the avalanche of teenage girls rushing to order swimsuits?"

It was more than a risk. It was already happening.

"A suffocating deluge of swimsuits!"

"Don't forget the panties!"

Between a suffocating deluge of swimsuit orders and a squeezing throng of underwear orders, we girls were absolutely drowning him. We had taken off our heavy equipment when we went to the bath, but even in light equipment we were all level 100; a stampede of us attempting to submit orders had him drowning in the rush of bodies. I saw his arms waving up at the sky, struggling to escape. Yep, he was drowning. I guess he never got the "Undrownable" skill, after all.

"He used to be so shy."

"Worrying about how he looked in front of everyone and all that."

"But this is another world!"

"Yeah, we're friends now!"

"So give us our bikinis!"

"Let's goooo!"

Jiggle jiggle!

We left a pile of orders on the victim's drowned corpse. *I'll take a black one, thank you!* Well, it was going to be two-toned, but really that just meant a plain bikini.

"Patterns are cute, but what I really love is the adjustable size!"

"He said he figured out how to transfer the prismatic property to fit!"

"No way!"

Haruka-kun was the only one who could use this new "Pattern Print" ability, so the fight to get in orders was fierce. I had underestimated the power of swimsuits. I didn't expect *everyone* to be so desperate to get in orders, so I had let my guard down when everyone stripped off their equipment.

"I can't wait for my bikini debut!"

"Where should we go swimming?"

"First we need to wipe out all the river monsters."

"I saw some naval mines, but no swim floats."

We had never dreamed that we'd be able to get floral-pattern bikinis in this world. I was excited, but that Transcription ability seemed expensive,

so I needed to save up money, too.

"Ooh, and after florals I gotta get myself something in gingham print!"

"Yes please!"

"We need him to set up that Pattern Print machine or whatever."

We saw that Haruka-kun was wearing houndstooth-check cargo pants and forced an explanation out of him. You reap what you sow! Everyone was thrilled over the prospect of patterned clothing.

Lately, Shimazaki-san and her friends had been drawing up prospective patterns. Amo-san from the accessories club teamed up with the other Arts Club girls and they put all their efforts into making pattern sheets. They already managed to make prints with polka dots and stripes, so recently they had just been waiting for Haruka-kun to create his Transcription machine…during which time he also debuted swimsuits, creating whole new levels of uproar.

I threw in my order sheet. No response. Hadn't he recovered from drowning yet? Fortunately, we had taken off our equipment, so he was uninjured from the rush. His corpse even had a smile on its dead face.

Now! Time for our bath meeting. I wanted to hear more about the war, as well as the prospects for another bargain (maiden) sale (battle). We received solid intel that patterned trial products were on the horizon. It was information straight from the strongest, weakest individual's all-night combatant, which made it as good as fact!

DAY 63

NIGHT

Even one measly good reason can be made right with a glow-up! No?

MURIMURI CASTLE

GIRLS' BATH MEETING

WE HAD A SURPRISE GUEST. A visitor to the girl's bath—Angelica-san brought Princess Girl with her. We were all naked, so…oh. Well, Princess Girl stripped down like she knew us. She really liked the bath, apparently? Maybe a little too much?

"Allow me to reintroduce myself!" she chirped. "I am Shalliceres du Diorelle. Let's be friends!"

She was the princess of the realm. And she barged straight into our bath. For a royal, she had an incredibly sculpted, muscular body. And she seemed to dote on Angelica-san. Maybe a little too much? Yes, the princess was in a *very* good mood, and then there was her maid, who seemed like the silent type. What exactly was going on?

"Oh em geee, a real princess!"

"A princess? Taking a bath with us?! She's a celebrity!"

"Just call me Shalliceres," she said, "no titles necessary. And this is Ceres."

"Shalliceres-san is so nice!"

The girls took a liking to her. She looked so happy, surrounded by everyone…including the maid, Ceres-san, the princess's shadow. Haruka-kun said she was pretty strong. Even her name was a shadow of the princess. Shalliceres, Ceres, see? It was easy to remember, but honestly kind of repetitive.

The platinum-blonde princess and the chestnut-haired maid stripped down and joined us in the bath. Their bodies were nearly identical, down to their bone structure. They were glamorous, European types—what muscular bodies!

"Your black hair is so lovely, and your skin is silky smooth. It feels lovely!"

The princess even joined the washing and went around scrubbing everyone. She seemed particularly taken in by the bubbly body soap. She was so thrilled to rub, and pat, and scrub everyone that she could hardly hold back her smile.

"These bubbles!"

"Yeah, Haruka-kun keeps upgrading the soap."

"And charging accordingly…"

"Yeah…" (Tears. Of joy?)

It seemed incredibly rude for us to wash the princess's body, but the maid didn't say anything when we tried. The daughter of the king…perhaps she had never been able to have fun and screw around with friends, as equals. She'd probably never gotten the chance to play in the bath like this before. No wonder she didn't hold back playing in the bath, joyfully hugging and stroking everyone with a smile bursting across her face.

"Wow, you're quite built I see…" she murmured. *Rub…rub…*

"Eep! That tickles!" squealed Haga-san.

I'm sure she never had this back in the capital. All of the other girls were mere nobles, beneath her in status. It would've been impossible. She wouldn't have had friends to play with. This thing that had been so commonplace for all of us had been impossible for her.

"Your muscles are so soft…" she hummed. *Stroke…stroke…*

"H-hey, not there!" gasped Shisui-san.

"She seems to have locked in on the volleyball team," Vice Rep A said.

"Don't just watch. Help us!"

"Go get 'em!"

“Good luck?”

“You traaitooors! Eeeek!”

Twenty-three girls had turned the bath into a hybrid bubbly merry-go-round and wrestling competition. Whichever it was, it would’ve definitely killed Haruka-kun if he had been here. A bunch of naked girls wrestling in the bath probably would’ve done a bit more to him before it killed him, but it would’ve left a smile on his dead face.

“Now isn’t this lovely? Just looovely!” sang the princess.

She had targeted the volleyball team. She washed them, rubbing them head to toe, scrubbing their wet bodies with bubbles. She squeezed squeals out of them, stroked out gasps. Wait a second, gasps? Why was there gasping going on in the bath here?

“S-stop! Stop rubbing me!”

“Not there, you can’t touch me there—”

It’s getting a bit weird over there? This was supposed to be our girls’ meeting? So why did Haga-san and Shisui-san have red faces, and why were they gasping for air?

“They do have the best bodies out of all of us.”

“They’re pretty ripped.”

“But still slim.”

“And their breasts…”

“I’d be worried about anyone who tries to barge in to help at this point.”

“Aaah—ahh! You traitoooors! …Aaaahn!”

Well, I had my misgivings, but now that we were all squeaky clean, time to soak in the bath. *There’s nothing like a long bath after a day in the dungeons,* I thought.

“That soap is really marvelous,” the Princess said. “All of you—your skin is so smooth and moist. Just lovely.”

“Yeah, you can’t beat that soap.”

The princess had applied the skin-softening soap liberally on her face. And she couldn't stop touching us, either. I suppose that even for a royal, this body soap was unlike anything she had seen before. Some of the girls were eager to wash a princess, but they were settling for scrubbing each other. The only problem was the sudden epidemic of gasping and bright red faces.

"Wow, so soft!" *Rub…rub…*

"Eeeeeeep!"

After that, we had a practice match with Princess Girl. She was strong. That was the Sword Queen for you—her blows were overpowering, enough to take you to your knees. She had mastered the art of swordplay, both defensive and offensive. A worthy woman to receive the title of Sword Queen.

She was great at one-on-one, but together with Ceres-san in two-on-two matches, their coordination was flawless. There were no gaps in their offense.

And now, Haruka-kun was in his room powering up their equipment. The Sword Queen was having the time of her life, messing around with the girls. She had shouldered the weight of a country, embarked on a treacherous mission on her own. But she was also just a girl two years older than us, laughing and playing like the kid she still was in some ways. Still, she was a royal, which in these dangerous times meant her path sent her hurtling towards death. Back to where she would risk her life—back to the battlefield.

"Mmm, I've never felt better. I'm so happy!"

"Her way of washing…"

"It's way too sensual!"

I was sure Haruka-kun would come up with some reason or other to go along with her. I mean, a girl of her age charging into battle alone to sacrifice herself…obviously he wouldn't let her go alone. I knew that. We all did. Ceres-san would likely go too, but that still made just the two of them. Their opponent was an army of ten thousand, and they were opposing it alone. Just two girls. So of course Haruka-kun would follow. And if Haruka-kun went, so would the other two. Two quickly turned into three,

which ballooned to five… And those last three were the strongest, nastiest, hall-of-famer wrestling heels of them all. Those three could take on an army of thirty thousand monsters and they'd be the easy favorite. For them, an army of thirty thousand probably didn't sound like a full day's work.

"Are you sure you're going to go?"

"I must. I am the princess."

But that meant the second prince might make a move. It would create a second enemy to distract them. And in that case, if Haruka-kun couldn't take care of the second target, then we could. We were friends now. No girls who had spent time with each other in the bath could abandon one another. If we did, I'd never be able to look Haruka-kun in the eyes again.

But a battle against ten thousand other humans… We lacked experience, and there was a lot we still didn't know. Divided, we couldn't win. Not a two-front war.

Still, we could form battle tactics and strategies as best we could. The Princess, Shalliceres-san, was a general and master tactician, so we could learn from her. We could learn the art of war, what it meant to kill other people on the battlefield.

It was time for Shimazaki-san and her friend Kenbishi-san to go have their bras made. It would probably take them a while, and once they did, I doubted they'd be in any state to join the meeting. *Bra measurements kill your innocence,* I thought.

Shimazaki-san and her four friends, who were still under Haruka-kun's Servitude, felt great loyalty to him. You could say that they worshipped him. Which made them all the more nervous about what was about to happen… *Are they going to be okay?*

"But if they're, like, his personal maid crew and whatevs… Can't they, like…disobey him if he gives them an order?" Vice Rep B asked.

"I don't think they can!"

"And they're about to get like, *naked* with him. He's definitely gonna give them some sex commands, right? *Own me, owwwwn me, master!* And all that? And his commands are gonna make 'em do all, *mmmmmmf*, and all like, *aaaaaaahm, agh,* right? Right?!"

We all stood in silence, watching the two of them turn bright red as they marched off to that particular battlefield. Yeah, Vice Rep B had shown them a preview of things to come.

Even if Shimazaki-san and Kenbishi-san had all dangerous thoughts exorcised from their minds, measurements were still dangerous. His Magic Hands crawled and squirmed all over your body, brushing, squeezing, kneading, and shaking to find the perfect measurements, with delicate rubbing for the final adjustments, with ceaseless attacks launched one after the next after the next—that was absolutely devestating for untested maidens! And then, there were panties… Panties… Panties… *Thump.*

(Drowning.)

"Looks like Class Rep has a vivid imagination!"

Haruka-kun called them mean girls, but in reality they were pure, innocent maidens. *So go easy on them, Haruka-kun.* They still felt responsibility for what happened in the past, especially for what happened to Oda-kun and his friends. They were conscientious, easygoing girls. It didn't really bother them that he called them mean girls. They even took pride in the name, dubbing themselves the Mean Girl Squad. That's how easygoing they were. *Please just remember those poor girls' names, Haruka-kun. And mine?*

DAY 63

NIGHT

If lamé is lame, then is lame lamé lamer than just plain lamé?

MURIMURI CASTLE

A PRISON OF eternal squeezing. The boing-boing bench press, Part Two! Revenge of the teenage girl body merry-go-round?

"I mean, I never even go at them, so why do they gotta counterattack me like that? And sure, I underestimated the appeal of swimsuits, but there's nowhere for them to swim yet!"

And look at the bikini-to-one piece ratio in these orders! Even Class Rep wanted one?! Was that an effect of Super Horny and Alpha Male? Between horny Class Rep and lesbian Princess Girl, things were getting pretty busy over here.

"Well, if I'm already measuring them for underwear, swimsuits should be no problem…"

Jiggle jiggle.

Or is it that Book Club President is devising a naval warfare strategy?!

"If we went by waterway, we'd skip right to the capital? I think that's bypassing our current destination."

They probably just wanted everything and anything out of sheer boredom. What was wrong with the cheaper cut-cloth style clothes?

As Slimey splish-splashed in the bath, I recovered my energy. *I'm seriously gonna die if I don't do something about my Vitality and Power,* I thought. *I still can only take straight-on attacks from monsters up until around level 30.* Anything higher than that required equipment or preemptive obliteration.

"If I could use Teleport even the slightest bit then I could launch overwhelming attacks, but I'm too concerned about it going wrong. I can't

control it anyway, so I have no way of knowing where exactly I'll appear at what point in time. Ya know?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Speaking of which, I didn't know where my sex appeal was either. Was that Teleport's fault too? It was in a permanent state of Vanish, but it didn't reappear.

I mean, if I ever did master Teleport it would instantly become an invincible cheat skill. An instant-kill cheat skill. Things got ugly, but I *had* used it before. But since that one time, I hadn't successfully pulled it off. Not even once. No teleportation, and absolutely no reappearance from my sex appeal.

In the bath, I leisurely enjoyed some casual conversation and a heart-to-heart with Slimey, deepening our relationship and our wiggling. He squiggled, wriggled, and piggledy-wiggled, almost as much as I did. Super cute.

"Did you warm up?" I asked him. "Actually, is a warm bath good for Slimes, or are you a dish best served cold? Well, you seem to like baths, so I guess warm is better? Doesn't seem like you can catch colds, and you don't get swollen either, but if the warm water feels good then that's good with me. Anyway, ready to go?"

Wiggle wiggle!

I just realized that Slimey was getting washed with bubbly body soap designed for humans—was his skin okay? He did have complete physical resistances, so he wasn't suffering any damage. Come to think of it, having resistances *would* reduce the damage to your skin in this world. That probably slowed down aging and all other skin problems. *Never underestimate fantasy world skills,* I thought.

Now! On to strengthening Princess Girl and Maid Girl's equipment. Time to power 'em up with some mithril. They didn't seem to have any intention of giving up, so they'd better be prepared.

"Princess Girl is a sword-fighter, so I gotta give her dense armor designed to deflect blows to her shoulders and arms…on the flip side, that would just get in the way for the evasive, assassin-specialist Maid Girl. I'll cut away the excess, then add some endowed effects…kinda like this? Yup,

it's sexy and strong. Good for battle, good for the eyes, and fun to make—can't deny that. They'll probably get pissed at me when they see it, though?"

This Stupid Girly Princess Girl was determined to stupidly charge into a ten-thousand-vs-two battle, kinda like Mr. Meridad. Fight without thinking! Conquer the enemy head-on! She planned to charge straight into the enemy and destroy the commander. It went without saying that her plan was way too difficult to be realistic, and that's not even thinking about how she was supposed to escape from the midst of the army after taking the commander out.

I made her understand the situation, mixing some training in on the side. I showed her what it meant to have the power to fight, to destroy. Saying you were willing to throw your life away wasn't nearly enough. That was nothing more than suicide. I forced her to see the overwhelming difference in might, the way that exhaustion overwhelms your body, the way your will to fight caves in. The way all your skills are crushed one after the next… But even after getting beaten to Xs-for-eyes, she stood up. The princess fought until the end, pawing and struggling even after getting beaten ragged. She simply would not give up.

"Seriously. Plus the Old Prince Dude is still in a state of panic, still stuck in those pointless meetings on policy, strategy, and whatnot?"

Jiggle jiggle?

Well, the dude himself said he wasn't king material, and surrendered his own position in the inheritance hierarchy. I agreed with him: he wasn't suited for it. Suited or not, though, the decision was closing in on him. He was kind of a limp sorta guy, so he failed to make a decision, which only drew that decision closer. Rinse and repeat.

"So, today it's for Queen Bee and Mean Girl A… Hmm, I'm kinda scared!"

The moment I sensed their gaze on me, they looked ready to chomp my head straight off. I didn't like the idea of them chowing down on my head while I was making them bras, no thanks! Chomping on my head *would* put my head at just the right height to be staring into their boobs!

“W-well, I’m not staring, nor would I, obviously. Do I want to? Yes! But I won’t, ya know?”

Mean girls. Queen Bee and Mean Girls A to D were all tall, long-limbed model types. They were upstaged by the supermodel-type Vice Rep A, but in the chest department they had her beat.

“All of the mean girls are so similar in body type that it’s ridiculously hard to grasp the differences between their bodies!”

Knock-knock—it’s bra time.

“Welcome!” I called. “As in, come in but don’t bite me? ’Cause getting my head bit off during bra production isn’t just a public safety concern. It’s got straight-up criminal liability? You’ll be sued for workplace damages? Ya know?”

“How many times do we have to say it?! We won’t bite you!”

“Why are you worried about that every time we see you?!”

Miss Armor Rep showed them in. Everything was as planned, but as expected, I didn’t know how to deal with these mean girls. They had really been helping me out lately with designs for underwear, clothes, and swimsuits, and their designs had already become huge hits at the general store. They had taken charge of the pattern prints at the clothes factory, and thanks to them, profits were on the rise. *Another stupendous source of income for me!*

“I’m gonna close my eyes, but if you bite me I’ll know—got it?”

“We’re not going to bite you!” they shouted.

Per usual, Miss Armor Rep covered my eyes with her clumsy fingers, and I got to work. One of the most painful parts of this was the long silence and then the rustling of clothes as they got undressed. Painful in a teenage boy sense. Plus, Miss Armor Rep’s fingers seemed to change positions at the most peculiar times?

“I’ll figure out the mold, of course, but we also need to figure out the design,” I said.

“Nothing could be more elaborate than *that* design, though!”

“Yeah, how many frills and lace bits does one bra need?!”

No, those were for reinforcement. Obviously? Hm, so I couldn't just stay quiet, but what could I talk to the mean girls about? Clothes? They *had* submitted a bunch of orders.

"Oh yeah, so the templates for the pattern sheets are coming along, ya know. Looks like I'm going to need a ridiculous number of 'em, though? And there was that one with all the clover chains winding everywhere. Is that really necessary? I've never seen anything that fancy except in scarves for wrapping expensive gifts. Are you going to wear them like veils and then bite me?"

I had received (forced) orders and (violent) requests from twenty teenage girls for floral, polka-dot, pinstripe, and gingham-check patterns, so I was prioritizing them. Next came animal-print and camo, then a few orders for plant-print bandanas and paisley. There was even an order or two for tribal-style patterns…plus two for arabesque. Who was gonna wear something like that?

"It'll go to the bottom of the list, but we'll make it eventually," said Queen Bee.

"Arabesque might be too much, but an ivy print would be totally cute!" said Mean Girl A.

"Yeah, there are no preconceived biases or anything here, so it'll definitely become a hit!"

I thought they were going for arabesque, but now they wanted ivy? Hm, that did have kind of a medieval vibe.

"Arabesque patterns are just what we call patterns of leaves and branches and vines swirling and swaying in Japan, so it's not much different from European ivy patterns," explained Queen Bee.

Did that mean that arabesque patterns were also super intricate?

"You won't wear 'em and chomp on my face, then?"

"No, and hell no!"

It was true that European-type ivy patterns were a staple here, even commonly found on furniture. I could only imagine arabesque going on gift wrappings, but I guess there was more you could do with it.

“And right now Amo-chan from the accessories club is helping the arts girls make more printing blocks!”

“Kohanai-san from the fine art club is doing the drawings, so they’re gorgeous!”

“They’re all so creative and good with their hands. I heard it’s going super smoothly.”

“Kohanai-san already made the illustrations, so next she was talking about committing the patterns to cloth. Everything will be ready soon!”

“And there’s no end to the variations you can make by changing the size and arrangement of the patterns.”

They talked so fast! Well, the ultimate specialty outfits team of accessories club and handicrafts club had been making pattern paper and teaching me the basics of sewing all along. I learned how to season from Cooking Girl. Book Club President was, well, the president of the book club, so she knew everything…and then the last girl in the arts group was Fine Art Girl, apparently. I didn’t know that. Now that they mentioned it, she had been staring at the little museum I threw into the new White Loser Inn. So, she was the expert, huh? *She’s definitely gonna critique me!*

“Was she famous for something?” I asked. “Fine Art Girl?”

“How do you not know?!” the mean girls shouted at me.

Throughout the fitting session, they talked normally. They talked at light-speed, in harsh voices as always, but that was normal for them. But they were also fidgeting under Area Analyze, y’know? It was hard to measure properly when they were moving; that just sent overly vivid sensations right into my body…*soon I’ll be fidgeting too!* But they managed to talk as if nothing was happening, even so.

“Well, I saw her drawing some stuff, and I saw her mugshot in the newspapers and stuff, but the police never apprehended her, right?”

“She was in the newspaper for winning a prize!”

“Why would you assume she committed a crime without bothering to find out what it was?!”

“Er, I mean, the meatheads were always getting press for their crimes of idiocy and stuff?”

“The newspaper publishes things besides crime, you know!”

Totally normal. They were forcing themselves to have a normal conversation despite their embarrassment. Class Rep told me that the mean girls might sound harsh when they talk, but they were actually normal, good girls. They stood out for being good-looking, and even modeled sometimes, so they got bullied by the other girls out of jealousy. But they refused to let that get them down. They always put on a tough act.

“I always wanted to try designing my own clothes.”

“So weird that it actually came true in a fantasy world.”

They’d definitely changed from before. The only thing that hadn’t changed was their willingness to yell at me… And I was the only one they yelled at. *What the heck does Servitude really do?*

“Those arts girls are seriously amazing.”

I came up with the rough outline and adjusted the fit via stitching and piecing the fabric together, but I still felt them trembling. It was a natural reaction to stripping naked in a room with a guy. I could tell how hard they were trying to sound normal, but it was only natural to be scared and embarrassed. Yeah, Vice Rep B was the only one who didn’t give a crap from start to finish.

They probably had the strongest competitive spirit in the class—fiercely, desperately trying to survive. On the other hand, they were also the most ordinary and the weakest. Our class was always known as the “hot girls class” or the “future-celeb class,” filled with an unusually high number of good-looking girls. All of the girls who stood out the most gathered under Mistress Class Rep, mostly to avoid bullying from the other girls in school. Meanwhile, the guys were either delinquents, bullied nerds, or the most famous athletes in the school. The biggest mystery of all was how a normal guy like me ended up in that ridiculous class!

The other the girls in the class didn’t put up a front—they just kept being themselves. Those girls were naturally strong. Compared to the other girls, who were immune to taunts and bullying, the mean girls were mentally frail. Frail to the point where they attacked before getting attacked and avoided showing any sign of weakness.

“By the way, how about you guys release Servitude?” I said. “I don’t want to open the newspaper and see some weird insinuations about me. I seriously don’t think my sex appeal can take any more attacks! My sex appeal ran away screaming and still hasn’t come back! Maybe I should put up a ‘Missing’ poster around? Where should I hang it?”

They should’ve been scared of being unable to disobey orders from a teenage boy, but instead they stubbornly refused to release the ability.

“No! No way!”

“We haven’t paid you back yet…and…anyway, you still haven’t remembered our names!”

“Yeah, remember our names first, then we’ll think about releasing it!”

The combination of embarrassment and Magic Hands’ fitting procedure had turned their faces and bodies bright red from tip to tail, but they were still acting tough. They hid their weakness, tried to act strong, and desperately worked toward getting stronger. *I guess the weakest have the strongest competitive spirit after all.*

It was time to go…below. That was the most psychologically devastating and yet psychically stimulating part; it’d even caused the noble Mistress Class Rep to collapse into incoherency. The bottom measurement could not be contained. *Please, don’t lose your strength…* Good luck?

“Eeeeeeeeeek! Ah—aaah—M-Mommy!”

Nope, game over.

“They’re dead?”

Jiggle jiggle.

Still, it was quite the surprise. I certainly wasn’t expecting them to say, “Mommy.” It was almost lame, but the nerds were champions of lame, and they would be seriously thrilled to hear that the mean girls said *Mommy*. Must’ve been pretty amazing lamé spandex that I used? ’Cause they died, see? And now to dispose of these mean girl corpses—*oh, they’re twitching?*

“Shit! The headline’s gonna be ‘Naked Teen Girls’ Twitching Corpses Found in Teen Boy’s Bedroom!’ I’d definitely get in trouble! And in the newspaper, too!”

With this crime scene, the police could arrest the culprit before the evidence van even pulled up! Why did I get the sense that even though I was doing a good deed, two naked girls keeled over in a fully-clothed teenage-boy’s bedroom still looked like a crime?

“It’s not a cover-up? ’Cause if I wasn’t covered up then it’d be even worse? I swear?”

Stop it, I can’t bear to look at them! Miss Armor Rep was totally neglecting her blindfold duty. Why was her blindfold apparatus so utterly dysfunctional? A teenage boy who keeps his eyes shut as he clothes them

and innocently moves the bodies somewhere more innocent is obviously doing it because he *is* innocent, right?

Still, the lamé bit was shocking. But a risqué dance sounded lovely right about now! A risqué sexy dance with Miss Armor Rep moaning *Daddy?* That'd be the furthest thing from lame, in fact. If lamé is lame, then is lame lamé lamer than just plain lamé? But maybe lamé is too risqué?

Those mean girls got too into it, for sure. Steam was still coming out of their ears. They tried too hard, as they always did. Just another day in the fantasy world.

DAY 64

MORNING

Forcing me to converse in a conversation while covering my mouth so I can't converse isn't much of a conversation.

MURIMURI CASTLE

WE HAD A group discussion. Various representatives gathered to discuss the course of action, a meeting to coordinate our movements and stay out of each other's way. A certain individual planned not just to stay out of the way, but to selfishly smash through everyone else's way altogether. If we asked him to participate then he would lead the whole meeting into chaos, so Angelica-san held his mouth shut with her hands. Any time he spoke he would immediately smash through the conversation and crash through all logic. *Thank you for your assistance, Angelica-san!*

Various parties submitted their proposals and we started to debate them. The meeting heated up, Haruka-kun fell asleep… He didn't even intend to listen, so I supposed there was no point in forcing his mouth shut to begin with. *Yup, just let him sleep. Nothing good will come of him waking up!*

Plan A: Defeat the enemy's first division with the frontier army and advance to the capital. Proposed by Lord Omui. We would remain at Murimuri Castle to defend the domain. Three thousand soldiers would mobilize to defeat an enemy corps of thirty thousand. On top of that, lay siege to the capital, guarded by twenty thousand. *This plan is hopeless?*

Plan B: Negotiate with the first prince's army and advance to the capital. Proposed by the chancellor. Hand over Haruka-kun as leverage to reach a temporary agreement. Unfortunately, the chances of an agreement were still vanishingly small and the person in question would have no incentive for cooperating with such a strategy. Trying to force the three of them into an agreement was even more dangerous than Plan A.

Plan C: Join the first prince's army and go together to the capital to negotiate with the second prince. If negotiations failed, reconquer the capital and then negotiate with the first prince. This was the prince's backup plan, but anything involving giving over Haruka-kun would only end in blood. That was like going to negotiations with a nuclear weapon. *An absolutely terrible idea.*

Plan D: Wait at Murimuri Castle and defeat the first prince's army here. That was our plan. It was the safest and most surefire…but it sacrificed the people of the kingdom between here and the capital. We only knew the people here in Omui. But the others, especially the prince's soldiers, had family and friends and lovers there that they wanted to save.

Plan E: Join forces and liberate the capital. Leave the defenses to Haruka-kun alone. Proposed by Haruka-kun. The table erupted in protest at this one. It was also a ludicrously risky plan. But Angelica-san nodded, and Slimey jiggled.

The only plan that got unanimously thrown out was Plan F. That was Shalliceres's plan, where she alone, accompanied only by her maid, stopped the first prince's army while the rest of us protected the frontier. Of course, it was an absurd proposal for the two of them to stop an entire army on their own, so there was no way we would let that one happen.

No one could agree on a plan. No one could convince anyone else. Plan A was reckless and unlikely to succeed, but if our class accompanied the frontier army, it wasn't impossible. But that would leave Omui defenseless. Plan F was a suicide mission. Obviously the princess would die, so that was out of the question. But if Haruka-kun went with her and used guerrilla tactics, it might actually work. He could probably halt the entire army in its tracks. He might even wipe them out.

Plans B and C… I had the feeling those would go crazy in a different way. We couldn't hand over Haruka-kun to the enemy, and if they accepted him, they would receive a gift that would make them miserable beyond all understanding.

The others couldn't accept Plan D. I understood why. It was the safest in that it secured the safety of Omui, but everyone who had family and friends in the kingdom naturally rejected it. We would feel the same way in their shoes.

Which left…Plan E.

“I mean, it’s just like, that, ya know? If we just leave the first prince’s army, they’ll come here anyway, so we just gotta wait for them? And they’re so slow, so y’all can just go to the capital, beat ’em, and come back here. There’s definitely enough, ya feel? There’s a chance we’re not the favorites, but with the nerdarinos and Slimey in the mix, pretty sure y’all could pull it off, right? Ya know, you feel, *tú comprendes*, you know the beat I’m layin’ down ’n stuff? I swear!”

As expected, no one understood what he was saying. The first prince’s army was “coming here anyway.” So we’d defeat the second prince in the meantime, and then come back here in time to handle the first prince’s army. Because there was “definitely enough, ya feel?” And there was even “a chance we’re not the favorites.”

Right. Clear as mud.

Let’s see… He was saying that we should go take the capital back over, and then come back here to wait. Which would lead to a war of attrition… Was Haruka-kun just going to lead us to victory through sheer force of will?

And Haruka-kun defending Murimuri Castle alone…not even with Angelica-san, or Stalker Girl, or Slimey, or Oda-kun’s group, or anyone else —literally just him. He wanted to handle the battle here himself.

The prince kept shouting to “seize him” and declaring, “As if I’d run!” but everyone else fell silent. There was no way Plan E would work. But at the same time, Plan E was the only one that addressed the root causes of the war. And Angelica-san, who hated to be separated from Haruka-kun more than anything, was nodding. Even Slimey was jiggling in agreement.

“If I’m alone, it’ll just be faster that way. ’Cause I’ve kinda got this secret-slash-not-so-secret plan. Draw ’em in, throw it out, and crush ’em all. Well, even if I don’t, they’ll get crushed, and if there’s crushing going on it’s better if no one else is around? Oh, and there’ll be growing, so people will get in the way of that, too. Ya know?”

He was saying he had a plan. Naturally, it was impossible to understand. All I heard was chaos. I also understood that he wasn’t concerned about the first prince’s army of thirty thousand soldiers. He

seemed to take it for granted they'd be wiped out. That was what he was trying to imply.

We failed to reach an agreement. There was no compromise to be found. Haruka-kun had already roped Oda-kun's group into his plan. Kakizaki-kun's group too, but they were keeping quiet. Don't tell me they'd been forced into Servitude, too?! Oda-kun and his friends, for their part, looked unusually rugged and determined.

"Class Rep, why don't you split off into a girls' group and decide amongst yourselves?"

"We won't be prepared in the case of a sudden attack, so we need to make a decision soon."

"Agreed. It looks like everyone's going to splinter!"

Everyone moving independently would be a disaster. We already lacked the numbers; any further division doomed our chances. Duke Omui was trying to convince the prince, so that meant our job was to rope in the princess. The princess was the rashest and in the gravest danger, followed by the prince.

"Princess Shalliceres, we're about to hold a girls' meeting," I called to her. "Would you like to join us?"

"We're having tea and sweets, too!"

That should hopefully bring her into the fold. The single word "sweets" sent her into a joyous mood. Haruka-kun had even clocked it—he told her if she died, she wouldn't be able to eat sweets anymore. In a way, it was a very wise thing to say.

Normally Haruka-kun's ramblings were far from wise—more wild than wise—but no one ever was able to think of how to respond to them anyway.

"Stalker Girl, a special order from Haruka-kun—we'll pay you with ten sweets."

"Leave it to me! I'll await those treats with open jaws!"

Awesome! Someone'd had the bright idea to put a bell around Haruka-kun's neck. As of now, even Angelica-san and Slimey were on board with Haruka-kun's plan. Who knew what he'd do next? It was vital to

have a sense of where he was and if he was approaching. In the meantime, we moved to the largest bedroom to have a girls' meeting with tea and sweets.

"If Haruka-kun thinks he can pull it off on his own, then he has a plan."

"Yeah, if Haruka-kun is just going to wait for the enemy here…he'll definitely wipe them out. I think?"

"I'm a bit worried about him being completely alone, but he has the pseudo-dungeon *and* Murimuri Castle on his side. He designed both of them."

"And he has himself…"

"He's meeting them at the gates of their own personal hell!"

But it sounded like something came after the pseudo-dungeon and Murimuri Castle. In fact, it sounded like he was trying to head to the capital, and then come back to finish the enemy. But could the rest of us keep up? How could we conquer the capital so quickly? What was the plan, here? He made it sound like it would all naturally fall into place.

"It sounds like the main part is *after* the capital falls, right?"

"And Oda-kun's party's role seems to be important."

"Yeah, they looked serious."

"I'm just worried about Angelica-san and Stalker Girl staying apart from him."

"Haruka-kun, completely alone…"

"Shouldn't we leave someone to protect him? Like Class Rep, or maybe the Gymnastic Girl…"

I would feel much better if he had someone around to protect him. For unavoidable attacks, Shield Rep would serve as the best defense, while Rhythmic Gymnastics Girl would provide the best protection from an assassin. I doubted the enemy corps would have the resources to send a real threat his way. No matter what happened, Shield Rep and Gymnastics Girl would be at much greater risk than Haruka-kun.

Shimazaki-san's party probably wanted to stay with him most of all, but they didn't say anything. They also wanted to stick with the rest of the group, especially Oda-kun's party. So in this case where they couldn't have both, they decided to grit their teeth and remain silent.

"Without Oda-kun and Kakizaki-kun's parties we have no chance of defeating the enemy. With all twenty of us, just barely. *Maybe*."

"Yeah, the numbers disadvantage is overwhelming."

Haruka-kun's explanation of his plan was just too garbled to understand. It was like he was trying to confuse us on purpose. Maybe he was trying to do something dangerous…but if he was, then Angelica-san and Slimey would refuse to leave his side. Which meant that it was fine, probably.

"Excuse me, but I'll join your troop," said the princess. "I want to do all I can to help."

"Are you serious? Yes, you're more than welcome!"

"A princess has joined the squad!"

The princess was the only outlier to join our group. If we invited Lady Merielle as well, that would make two. *I'll try asking her?* I didn't know if we made a 'troop' of our own, but we were certainly getting the numbers for it.

"Let's go practice! With the princess!"

"Good idea."

We then began our war class, where the princess lectured us about battle tactics and taught us how to coordinate as a unit. She even taught us about leadership. Not how to command complex squad movements, but a basic foundation in how to give out concise orders. Her basic formations and tactics were simple but effective, and she knew how to make snap judgments based on the battlefield situation to give us the greatest chance of victory. She was a true general.

"You are all so strong!" she called. "With your individual might, your collective might can increase a hundred fold! As twenty, you have the strength to take on ten thousand!"

"*I think ten thousand is pushing it?!"*

Meanwhile, I asked as many questions as I could about everything from battle tactics to coordination, to how to match up our skills effective, to determining the order of offensive and defensive maneuvers.

“Five hundred per person?”

“When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound so bad, weirdly enough!”

Our troop of twenty-two girls rapidly turned into well-disciplined warriors, and our coordinated tactics were smooth as clockwork. With two nobles who preferred close combat on the front lines, we were guaranteed to be tough. This was the charisma of a princess, a renowned general of Diorelle.

She only got this strong by fighting *for* Diorelle. By fighting to protect its people. And now, in the next battle, we would fight to protect her.

DAY 64

MORNING

Looks like I'm gonna have to take responsibility for the survival of some old dudes, so no speedy movements.

MURIMURI CASTLE

WE'D BURNED THROUGH another week. We could've been fighting in the capital by now if we'd gotten the lead out. So we had to do the seven-day plan in…four was impossible, so five? But six was hardly different than seven? And at their speed, three was out of the question… Ugh, they were in the way!

At present, the prince and the Third Division were separated from each other, as were the nobles. They were in regiments of a few thousand each, scattered and advancing toward us. The nobles' army and major marquis's houses stuck with the prince. I call him the prince, but his mother was from one of those noble houses, and he'd been stuck in that house since birth, so he may as well have been one of the nobles. Which was stupid, because that basically took away his chances of inheriting the throne… How stupid could you get?

Anyhow, the first prince's army was hurrying at full speed, but they were still days away. Even if they tried to bulldoze their way through, I had dispatched operable attack-and-reconnaissance long-range golems to Stalker Girl's group, so that should slow them down a bit. But even if we managed to find out more about them, I doubted the first prince had any secret weapons. As of yet, we hadn't observed anything out of the ordinary.

"Just what are they thinking with this invasion?"

I doubted they were thinking at all. That meant they were dupes. Unwitting bait, or a disposable way to soften us up, or a way to find out our abilities… I guess they were the same thing to us, too. I still didn't know their plan for the pseudo-dungeon, but if they just planned to attack with brute force, they would be easy pickings. Dungeon duck goose. Two of

those would go great in hot pot, incidentally, but not these ducks. They weren't bringing either scallions or pots with them, and you couldn't just show up to a hot pot party empty-handed. I'd be mashing these party crashers to a fine, creamy paste.

"Even if I manage to go to the capital in the fastest possible time of one day, that means I still need to destroy the second prince's army in less than five days. Sounds tough…?"

And I couldn't forget about Shut-In… If I arrived at the capital, I risked activating it, and then I'd be stuck in place. But time was a prickly, sticky thing here, and the old dudes were *still* holding meetings. The three of us could get to the capital in one day. Two would be more than enough for my classmates. But the army? The army was slow. At very best, a suppression force would take two days to arrive.

The way there was fine, but we were running out of time to make sure we could get back. Per Stalker Girl's intel, the Imperial Guard that got separated from Princess Girl were currently reorganizing at a town in between here and the capital. If we met up with them as part of the plan, it would take longer than two days. We didn't have time to begin with, so I'd really rather the old dudes got moving.

"Seriously? Even though we already have the perfect plan?"

In my plan, the one unanimously opposed by everyone else, we would casually go smack around the first prince's army on the way to the capital. Then, after we got done smacking him about, the first prince's army would take more than a week to get to the duchy. But if they were too slow, then the manipulators from behind the scenes could make a move, so my plan was honestly the best option.

"Running endless calculations and all that gets complicated and junk, so let's just get to business and stop 'em best we can… Getting too precious about the little details could end poorly for us."

I whipped up a written proposal. I labeled it as plan E + B + A, and handed it over to the duke's advisor. All I had to do was wait for the response. Since it included the old dudes' ideas, they should like it. This was the compromise.

Stalker Girl's clan reported that the prince himself wasn't in great condition. Great! Then we'd take him on. *Looks like I'm gonna have to take responsibility for the survival of some old dudes, so no speedy movements.*

Oh yeah, we'd take care of him.

"But if they still haven't showed up there, then maybe there's a possibility here?" I wondered.

I already went and sent the nerd party ahead. The order getting mixed up could cause chaos. It wasn't like I could give them orders that they'd totally understand, but I gave specific instructions to Slimey. That was good enough.

Until the enemy played their hand, it was just a matter of who could muster the stronger force. If we didn't finish off both enemies in seven days, we were screwed. We would be at a major disadvantage in a three-way battle.

"Any longer than ten days and we won't make it in time," I thought aloud. "Don't know how long our cheap trick'll work for, but in the worst-case scenario, waiting could lead to a straight-up loss."

Before that, we just have to make a move. *After that, our local hospitality can take care of them.* Our side and their side were only acting in our own interests, so they had no basis to complain about what we did.

"I have to admit I'm curious about what the ace up their sleeve is… unless…what could it be?"

So long as it wasn't anything major, we could chill. But if we let our guard down too far, every single one of us could die. *That'd be foolish,* I thought*. I made ample preparations, but nothing close to ironclad, and that's impossible in the first place. If we don't finish them off before they use their secret weapon, we'll lose.*

"Winning and losing aren't real concepts in war, anyway."

So I'll invent a win if I have to.

"Trying to prevent yourself from getting screwed, and making plans to screw the enemy. In the end it's all hate, innit?"

Nod nod.

Textbook war. Book Club President read about war, knew all about battle movements…but if my own knowledge wasn't up to scratch, everything would fall apart. My sex appeal had already abandoned me, but to think that distractions could disband my battle strategy… *That'll disappoint, disgust, and disrepair my sex appeal even further!*

"It's gonna be a potluck in the end, I guess. First hot pot, now potluck…from the sound of it, we're on the up-and-up! Too bad this is the wrong kinda potluck. You never know how things are gonna go, whether it's the fantasy world or the one we came from, ya feel?"

Jiggle jiggle.

The secret war behind this farce of the kingdom. Just how many people were manipulating the players on the stage? What was really going on behind the scenes?

"Point is, we're going to a potluck, and when we find out what we get, just tell 'em to get prepared quick? Okay, I'mma bounce then—see you in like two hours, so just kick it till it's time? Can you dig it? Yes, you can?"

Nod nod.

We had the fort, so we didn't need defense, and a few traps were easy to make. After that, it was a waiting game. *Let's get this over with.* Class Rep and the girls already went dungeon raiding and even invited Princess Girl and Merimeri-san, which meant that I'd need to go find the hidden rooms later. Sheesh, so much busywork. *So why do I have to wait for old dudes?!*

"Is this really a Farming Sim Life in Another World? But about harping on old dudes rather than LARPing harvesting, and about planting traps rather than planting plants? In a sense, food-based weapons would actually save both cost and energy?"

The first prince's main force was the Third Division and the nobles' army. They had heavy, skill-equipped armor, and an advance force that wielded ten-foot plus great shields and spears. The rearguard was fully equipped with magic capabilities, which was why they were so slow. Like, damn slow. Slower than a turtle. You could end up passing them through sheer inertia. Even a losing hare would feel slow as heck in this situation. I

could take a nap for an eternity and still wake up in time to beat both of them in this race!

It'd be better off to just ignore them, but the king's younger brother still wanted to negotiate. And Mr. Meridad was nervous about the idea of just going around them entirely. So it wasn't totally pointless to go harass them a little.

"Looks like I'm gonna have to take responsibility for the survival of some old dudes, so no speedy movements…"

But no matter how heavy and strong your equipment was, if your movement slowed down to match it, you weren't any stronger. Speed meant strength. Whoever killed first won. Ergo, if you're faster, you killed more people. Better to be fast in war than slow and steady.

I just had to do what I could. I couldn't protect, so I went around killing. Killing with a menacing guerrilla warfare approach—now that was powerful.

"Having guests requires so much prep, you know? A potluck and all… I was hoping to have hotpot for dinner, but instead I've just had to cook up all these plans. Although they are pretty tasty!"

Time to play our hands. All we had to do was get more cards. And like, better ones.

"Haruka-sama, Omui-sama would like to have a word with you. Can you spare a moment of your time? Shall I bring you to him? You'll have to wait a moment, but…"

It was Mr. Meridad's advisor. His attitude with his boss seemed to grow progressively worse every time. I mean, with all those pointless meetings I supposed this old dude must've been pretty free to do what he wanted. Yet here I was, preparing potlucks and hot pots and planting plans…or at least my Magic Hands were.

"Well, I'm already done, so sure. Did they finish up? The elderly meeting of old dudes?"

"They appear to have come to a decision. I question it, I admit…His Royal Highness…"

“I mean, we’re trying to accomplish the same goals here, so it’s all good? Because their mighty painful struggle is being waged with all the best intentions, ya know. It’s all we got left, ya feel?”

“Lord Meropapa is friends with His Highness and with Diorelle itself, so he feels a fatherly duty. That I understand. But you have no reason to protect them. So why would you…why…”

I get it now, he’s not concerned about Mr. Meridad but about the Old Prince Dude, I thought, *’cause Mr. Meridad is trying to protect the Old Prince Dude, which he doesn’t dig.* Which meant he must’ve been disappointed about Mr. Meridad’s lack of movement here. He’d been sitting back in his old duke’s castle where all the massage chairs were. *He was always sitting in those?*

“Yeah, it sounds like Old Prince Dude’s seriously unpopular. Everyone thinks he’s uncouth and unpleasant, but still, he was fearlessly, forcefully, unflaggingly, furiously trying to save the kingdom, so he’s still a hero and stuff. Probably?”

He didn’t have the strength or talent to become a hero. He was a hero out of sheer willpower. He devoted himself to doing something, trying anything, but in the end he couldn’t do jack. Even though he recognized his own powerlessness, he was still willing to give up the only thing he had that had any value at all. A stupid, pointless, foolish, lost, loser hero.

“His way of thinking is unsalvageable!” the advisor exclaimed.

“Yeah, it didn’t *make* sense, but it did *have* sense.”

No one else counted on that princely dude. Everyone disregarded him, ignored him, rejected him. But he still wanted to do whatever it took to save the kingdom, no matter how much suffering it entailed. He was determined to paw and struggle to the end, to strike painless blows if he could…he would never give up. He could do nothing, he received nothing, he just kept fighting like a total moron powerlessly and pointlessly, all on his own. A hero.

“Even though he’s powerless, clueless, and senseless, he’s got pride, right? Ya feel?”

Every time he made a move, the situation got worse and worse, to the point where he couldn’t even sacrifice his life to save it. Still, he didn’t give

up on offering the one thing he could—his life. As the representative of the king, the less useless he became the more he was willing to sacrifice. He had disregarded his life long ago, tried to achieve the unachievable, and kept crawling and crawling through the mud without even seeing the destination, all for the king. He was a powerless, pointless, clueless, senseless representative, a pathetic and tragic stand-in king.

"Not just powerless and clueless, he's reckless to the point of calamity," I said. "Even if no one else recognizes it, even if it's meaningless…that there is a hero."

"Is that so?"

No one recognized him, everyone thought he was a fool, and tossed him aside. They sneered at him, ignored him, bullied him, forgot him. An incomprehensible hero, accomplisher of no deeds. Much less than no deeds, he was a nuisance who interfered with progress. Someone who just shut up and did nothing would've been better than him. And still he didn't restrain himself, didn't seek recognition—he just kept fighting.

"Someone like that's gotta be a hero, ya know?"

That's why the kingdom would be saved. To be honest, it would be faster to just crush everyone and be done with it. Princess Girl didn't seem to care about ruling the kingdom, so there really wasn't any point in letting it survive, and it'd be much easier to just finish off the kingdom altogether. But even if the Old Prince Dude had nothing, it looked like maybe, through sheer force of will, he held something inside of him worth saving after all.

Princess Girl said it, as did the incomprehensible hero himself. They wanted to achieve the impossible—to prevent war from harming the civilians. I mean, it was *way* too late for that. Fully armed militaries were already flying at each other at full speeds. But they wanted to put a stop to it here.

Those two royals reached pretty shockingly sky-high levels of pointless, meaningless, powerless worthlessness. Their powerlessness caused them suffering, the powerlessness of the kingdom was leading to the downfall of the frontier, and yet even Duke Meridad was trying to fight for the kingdom. The sheer degree of their recklessness was admirable.

“Powerless against the other nations, betrayed by the nobles, budget eaten away, so he used his private inheritance to support the kingdom apparently? That just means it’s inevitable. Investments breed dividends, ya know?”

So the kingdom had to be saved in the end. He was powerlessly, helplessly, recklessly, meaninglessly, worthlessly trying to end the civil war. Any other outcome would be pointless. So the kingdom would be saved. The future generations wouldn’t know him for any of his silly qualities—they would know him as the hero who saved the kingdom.

He was birds of a feather with Mr. Meridad. And the rest of the royal family, too. He hadn’t inherited any talent or ability, but he had inherited pride in spades. As a pointless, powerless, talentless royal, he could show resolve and resolve alone. The most worthless and yet valuable quality he could have.

There was no civil war. There wouldn’t be fighting after all. If this powerless, talentless, brainless half-wit of a hero was so determined to crawl through the mud…then he’d have a passing side-character’s death like he deserved. ’Cause his whole existence was pointless in that scenario. The only point of someone like that was to get ripped apart (and ripped off). Ya know?

DAY 64

DIORELLE

What's with the meaningless resistance to your pointless, meaningless death?

NATIONAL ROAD

OUR MESSENGER had arrived at the so-called "Frontier Reclamation Army" at last. Our message to them was that the opposition to the church and nobles was entirely spearheaded by the brat, and that Omui had no role in it. In exchange for the brat and the dungeon king's treasure, they would end their assault. The deal was signed and sealed.

We did it, I thought. *We finally did it. Now…*

"Let the true negotiations begin."

The first prince undoubtedly wanted me to hand over my rights as the representative of the kingdom, but I would not submit to that. In the capital, the second prince had launched a rebellion, which prevented any formal transfer even if I had been inclined. But in any case, for a transfer of power, I would have to take measures to ensure that the king not be subject to the whims of the great noble houses and the church.

If I swore my loyalty to the first prince, then surely he would not point his sword at Princess Shalliceres. Then we could dissolve his forces, reassemble the royal army, then force the nobility to pledge their loyalty to us anew.

Ever since my brother the king fell ill, I found myself unable to act. Until I could restore some manner of normalcy, I could not look my brother in the eyes. I had to work with Lord Meropapa, those foreign children, and that contemptible brat—at least until I finished these matters, or until I drew my final breath.

I was well aware of how others saw me. No one cared much for the life of a worthless chancellor such as myself. But I had nothing else to offer besides that: merely my own life. Not that of a king, or a royal. Just my

own. I was not blessed with strength, skill, nor talent. All I had to my name was my royal birth; all I had to offer was my life. I refused to ask for forgiveness or yield under threat. To be hated, resented, begrudged, and despised was simply the burden of duty.

"But in order to save Diorelle, we also need the brat," I said. "First his head, and after that, my own."

He did not comprehend the gravity of our situation, nor his own! The brat just stood there blankly. He obtained everything he had on luck alone, that mannerless, infuriating, impertinent boy. His treasure ruined the kingdom, split it apart and caused our suffering. His mere presence was a calamity.

But Lord Meropapa was not wrong. To die despite having done no wrong—that was the duty of a man such as myself. No matter how much I disliked the boy, only I deserved to die.

The knight in florid, platinum armor remained by his side. That knight was the secret treasure of the dungeon, the source of this conflict. *I hate to turn her over to the church, but for the sake of my people, and for the people of the frontier… I must.*

That was the sum of what I knew so far. I had made it to this point with this in mind. However, all of my plans and considerations were for naught. The moment I presented the brat and the armored knight, we were surrounded. The signed agreement was a fake. The soldiers who had bowed in peace rose up and rounded us up immediately.

"Cowards!" I shouted.

"And you are, as ever, a fool, Uncle," the first prince replied.

He never intended to negotiate with us. The few dozen soldiers with him turned out to be hundreds…no, thousands. A thousand soldiers suddenly appeared—the magic of the church's mysterious weapons had somehow disguised them.

I understood by now how pointless it all was. I had been a step behind from the start, a clown despised by my own country. I was powerless until the end, and in fact, my powerlessness only caused more harm than ever. Now I would die, wallowing in shame, unable to return the

favors I owed… A pathetic ending fit for a powerless representative of the king.

"Boy!" I shouted. "Run! …I'm sorry."

I opposed Lord Meropapa by bringing the boy here. I believed that the negotiations were genuine. But when I looked over to the boy and the knight in beautiful, shining armor, my nephew gave his command: "Kill them." There were never any negotiations. I was always following a path toward not merely my death, but death at the hands of my laughable idiocy. I was a fool. A clown who wasted the precious gift of Lord Meropapa's savior, the boy, and brought the greatest treasure of the dungeon to my enemy's feet for nothing in return. Scorn rose onto Prince Guvadé's face as he sneered at me. *You're looking at me like I'm a worthless pig, you miserable prince!*

"Hurry! Go!"

What a tragedy, to be born talentless into the royal family. I was showered with opportunities, received a wonderful education and the perfect guidance. These gifts allowed me to appreciate just how talentless, powerless, and worthless I was. I lived as a mere tool of my brother, the king—a flawed tool, but one who was happy to be of use. Because that was all fate ever had planned for me, I swore my loyalty and pledged my faith, devoted myself to my labors, and did all I could to not bring shame to our family name.

But the first prince Guvadé borrowed the force of the dukes on his mother's side. He lacked the self-awareness of the talentless and sought power.

"So all you had was pride, eh?"

Alas. In the end, my incompetence brought a vile, irreconcilable shame upon us all. Dimwitted as I was, all I could do was follow orders. Untalented as I was, I avoided unnecessary actions as much as I could. I was never meant to be the representative of the king; I knew that. I knew it and resented it… It was mine to struggle against until my brother regained his health, but my vain thrashing stranded us in the worst possible situation.

To think that my idiocy would bring about the end of history. All that would remain was a country at the whims of foreign powers—this prince of

pigs would bring ruin to all that our family stood for. He would never do anything for our people.

"A country supported by the king and the people; the legacy of a lasting kingdom built for the people…" I sobbed. "It's all going to end because of me!"

I repaid every time our people, our vassals, had come to our aid, with cold-blooded vengeance. It was all over; we would all be killed by my witless hand. And it was even more witless to fret about that inevitability! I could try to go out with one more act of resistance, at least. Just one more.

"Run!" I roared. "Use me as a shield! And run!"

As my last and most foolish action on behalf of the king of Diorelle, I, the fool, shall shield the impertinent, cheeky brat and thus perish. This boy would not have died but for my ignorance. It was too late to save his life, but at the last second I could try to make amends, to use my dying moments to serve as a flimsy shield!

I had no skill with swords. Really, a worthless soldier. I was too weak to even protect an ordinary level 21 weakling. All I was good for was buying time in the end. But even then, I could not die, not yet! Not—*huh?!*

"Uh, Old Rude Rep? Well, you're not exactly repping old dudes 'cause you *are* an old dude, but…Old Dude Rep, Old Dude Rep? I mean, Old Dude? Can you just, like, stop getting in the way? You already turned me over, so why are ya trying to protect me now? You can't just return delivered goods like that. You'll need to submit a request form for returns—and I'm telling ya, the reshelving fee ain't cheap."

The boy stood in front of me. Did he dismiss my attempts, saying it was already finished? It was true in a sense, and I could make no amends. I could not even die in vain to protect him. I could not save the kingdom or my people. I tied up an innocent foreign boy and sent him to a meaningless death. I was a pathetic, foolish excuse for a king's representative, Of course he would condemn me, hold me in contempt. But why did he put his body in front of mine?!

"They're so stupid," the boy said. "They're dealing with a literally unarmed messenger by sending a heavy-armor frontline infantry at him with giant spears? Why don't they at least send out some scouts to verify

the terrain? Because this place for sure ain't flat? How stupid do you have to be to fight a war without checking the topography? This is just so freaking stupid, I can't stand it!"

The enemy fired their arrows. A spinning tree branch knocked them all aside.

"I mean, c'mon, going without some more lively equipment at this point, it's just unnecessarily stupid. Plus, the prince is a pig and stuff? Why would you make a pig a prince?! Although there *was* that orc who was a duke, so I guess there's not enough qualified applicants around? But for real, at least choose an orc over a pig! At least orcs are more humanoid in shape than pigs are…eh, who even cares? Ya following me here?"

"Tear the brat apart limb from limb! The one with the evil eyes!" Guvadé bellowed. "He called me, the glorious man bound to rule this kingdom, a pig! Do not let him die easily! He will die in never-ending torment, begging us to kill him until his last moments!"

The boy was insolent to royalty even with his last breath, but his words were fitting for a pig like Guvadé. I would permit this criticism!

"Well said, boy! In fact, calling him a pig may be too kind!"

Like him, I had brought disgrace upon our family name, but Guvadé was a true pig who lacked so much as a royal's pride. I couldn't let an innocent boy go through so much suffering at his hands. *Your real enemy here is my…* Huh? Where did my enemy go? Into the ground? He was in the ground, sunken in the ground, drowning… What was happening?

"Baaaaaah! Save meeee! Save me!"

"S-s-save us all…"

"Aaaggh! I can't get out! I can't get out!"

"Someone, lift me! I'm sinking! Hurry—"

The heavily armored foot-soldiers were sinking into the ground. And screaming.

"Aack! I c-can't breathe!"

"Someone, anybody! Damn, I'm going down!"

"Why—there wasn't a swamp here!"

“I can’t take my armor off! Someone get it off me! Save me!”

“Gah, gah, gup! Gi’m gobinggggh…”

The soldiers were unable to remove the heavy armor that they took such pride in, and so it dragged them down into the swamp. The site of our negotiations, a former plain, was currently a swampy marshland. Nothing short of hell as a terrain for armored infantry.

“Save you? I did save you! You were supposed to save the people, but did you save the people when they begged for you to save them? When you attacked their villages?”

Only the land we stood on remained. The land before us had all turned into swamp. But I knew well that this had not always been marshland.

“Yup, you didn’t save them. Far from it, you killed them, so who are you to ask for mercy? Did you honestly think I would save you? You’re soldiers who have sunk to the level of bandits. Sinking into a swamp sounds like a fitting death, right? You should all be happy with the symmetry. Do you honestly think that we’d be sad about you dying? Someone who kills can’t complain about being killed. You know that. If you didn’t want to die, then act like a proper army, but it’s way too late for that… I’m not gonna save ya.”

The boy babbled on and on, but there was no one around to listen or hear. There was no chance of it. The soldiers he addressed screamed and suffered as they drowned, sinking deeper and deeper into the earth.

Sucked up into the swamp, the soldiers drowned in mud. They suffocated as they cried and screamed in terror. They couldn’t even fight back; they couldn’t flee in their flashy armor. Instead they vanished, buried in it.

“What?! What is happening?! What did you—what did you do, you bastard! What?! *Whaaaaurrff!*”

The entire army was slowly eaten by the ground. Only the boy remained, standing at the verge of the swamp in his black cloak. He hadn’t moved an inch. It was as if nothing important had ever happened here.

“Uh, this place was a swamp all along? The surface was hardened, that’s all. Obviously you’d drown if you came with heavy infantry? The surface certainly isn’t hard anymore. Struggling will just make you sink faster, and if you don’t struggle you’ll sink anyway, and even if you don’t sink you’ll still sink. ’Cause that’s how it works. Yeah, they’re sunk.”

Silence fell upon the marsh. There were no more shouts or screams. the three of us stood alone in a quiet swamp—us two and the first prince.

“Looks like the pig got a big scare and passed out, but he’s only drowned up to his neck so far. You need him?”

With just his head sticking out of the mud, Guvadé’s head burst into flames. I didn’t know what had happened, or rather, what was happening… All I knew was that I had survived, and the first prince had not. I understood now what Lord Meropapa had told me.

The last thing Lord Meropapa said to me was: “If you are going to bring the boy with you, remember this one thing: that you have never experienced true fear. I mean fear of the strongest kind; fear that you cannot even begin to comprehend. You can measure strength, but *true* strength is beyond measure. And that which you cannot comprehend leads to true fear. Be careful, my lord. And good luck.”

I didn’t understand him then, and I didn’t understand now—what I did understand was the depth of what I didn’t understand. This boy was terrifying enough to strike fear into the heart of the god of war. This boy was dangerous. He might be the end of us.

DAY 64

MORNING

If you surpass the permitted limit of the saturation phenomenon, it'll overflow into a dangerous situation…so let's eliminate it.

MURIMURI CASTLE

ONCE THE TIME CAME, Miss Armor Rep went ahead.

She shook her head. Apparently she didn't like what she saw. The mission was fine, but apparently, she was unhappy with her armor. Stalker Girl's clan was going to lead us to protect towns and villages with guerrilla warfare. They'd be working inside the territories of the first prince's noble allies, so recklessness could be their downfall.

The first prince's army was attacking villages. Not just a few reckless soldiers, but the primary force. Stalker Girl's clan helped evacuate the villagers to safety, but the few village leaders who wanted to buy time and the farmers who couldn't leave their land were all massacred, their valuables and food plundered.

What they really hunted after was women. The army would leave chaos in their wake on the way to the frontier. I had heard that these nobles' armies were crude, but it turned out that they were savage beyond words.

"We need Miss Armor Rep to lure them out as the 'Knight in Shining Armor,' so I tried to give her the 'Spike Mail' as another piece of leftover dungeon equipment, but she seemed very upset. I suppose she doesn't want to wear it?"

I sent her away with an earnest, "Uh, look? Suspicious, evil, nasty-looking armor is way more effective, plus it's intimidating. Anyone would run away from her in that armor with the morning star being all like 'I'm *soooo* eeeeeviiiil!' or whatever! Seriously, anyone would run—ack, aaaagh! No, nothing, nothing? It just suits you… There's nothing wrong with that, get me? So…good luck! And be careful, ya know? See ya later!" She departed with teary eyes.

Indeed, Miss Armor Rep wore the fear-inducing, thorny, grim armor, menacing enough to induce even hardened criminals to flee at first sight—it went great with her teary eyes. Even if the demon king were to suddenly appear on sight, he would no doubt run straightaway back to his hidey hole. Plus, with such an overwhelming defense, it was unlikely that anyone would even try attacking her. If you saw her hulked out in that armor, you would run away. Absolutely. She was terrifying!

"That armor is more intensely frightening than the Dungeon Emperor herself!" I said. "I never thought I'd be able to sell that armor."

I went with the Imperial Guard, who were capable of high-speed movement skills, and Mr. Meridad's skill-equipped horses. We went in a palatial carriage sufficiently furnished to be worth inviting my sexy female knight friends. Finally, we had the Old Prince Dude tossed in at the edge of the renovated carriage, and then we departed. According to Stalker Girl's clan, the enemy was split into multiple forces, but the largest regiment was with the first prince. We were going to take out them first, then deal with the church before heading straight back to the frontier.

"I just want to get all this old-dude stuff over with! If you surpass the permitted limit of the old-dude-saturation phenomenon, it'll overflow into a dangerous situation…so let's eliminate it as fast as we can!"

Any "army" with the objective of attacking villages for money and women was a bunch of bandits, nothing more. Martial law didn't apply to them. The army was meant to protect the people, so any army that went around attacking people—the literal opposite—deserved to be erased both for my pleasure and for the world's benefit. *I'm surrounded by old dudes either way, so I gotta make the world brighter where I can.*

The way all this started, I finally stuffed Old Prince Dude into Mr. Meridad's carriage. The carriage shook like crazy out of sheer hurry, but the look in his eyes hadn't wavered. He must've thought these negotiations would save the kingdom, and he was determined to carry them out. But… only someone with meathead-level intelligence would think that negotiations were possible. It ain't happening. Seriously, you feel? Then, the horses took off.

"If this was the plan all along, we could've done it ages ago. We're way behind."

All of the horses wore Super-Speed sashes. These horses had become vital to our plans out of the blue, but since we only had a flat plain to traverse there was no problem with using them. We would arrive in one hour. At the end of that hour lay our ideal destination. Negotiations over deep, dead, and buried debates, and a swamp to bury them in was the ideal circumstance to say the least. So it was time to make good time and get there in time to make preparations. *Let's hurry.*

"*What?!* The sexy female knights are raiding dungeons with Class Rep?! They even brought Merimeri-san with them? They left me with nothing but old dudes! They made the Old Dude ratio 100 percent! What if I get infected with an Old Dude status ailment?!"

What was *with* this high-density Old Dude-ification?

"What happens if this old-dude concentrate agglutinates? We'll surpass critical old-dude mass, achieve old fission, and the world with perish in an Old Dudeclear Reaction! I can't let that happen! I mean, there'd simply be too many old dudes!"

Even if I aired my complaints, there were only old dudes around to listen. I was just muttering to myself in the carriage. Miss Armor Rep and Slimey weren't here, so I felt pretty alone. I had spent my whole life alone up until now, but things had been so busy and lively lately that I'd completely forgotten how to hack it.

I sensed a presence. We had reached the first prince's army at long last. And even though we reached them, they were just chatting. The Old Prince Dude was chatting about negotiations for the sake of negotiating, the various treaty conditions and clauses and whatever.

But who cared? This land was all we needed. We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together in a swamp, all that good stuff. And even though our fate was set to be the latter all along, Old Prince Dude was still out there jabbering away.

Then, he handed me over to the prince. Along with the "Shining Armor" as requested, but there was no womanly figure inside. It was just a normal shape. Once a womanly figure entered, *damn* did that suit of armor glow up! The sheer curves on that armor could create all sorts of new fetishes for a teenage boy, legit, for real, though!

“Kill him.”

The worthless empty game (negotiations) had finally finished. I’d been waiting for freaking *ever*! The idiot enemy soldiers had been slowly closing in around me and the idiot old dude for ages. There were never any negotiations from the start. What a waste of time! That took basically as long as a girls’ meeting! But there were *girls* at those meetings, meanwhile I was drowning in old dudes. *Let’s drown ’em instead!*

“Boy! Run! …I’m sorry.”

“No, no, no, don’t move—there are old dudes in the way! If you move you’ll drown and die? And ’cause you’re an old dude I won’t save you, okay? I mean it?”

Yup, it was over. It took ages to get here, but the moment the first prince put on the Platinum Armor, we skipped over the beginning straight to the end. I gave them the bait, and they happily gobbled it up. And the massacre began.

’Cause they didn’t even check the map for this battle. Which meant that they didn’t even think it would be a battle.

“They were stupid idiots all along. Stupid pigs, more like it.”

The lack of villagers in this area caused all sorts of problems. Like oinking and squealing… I tried to read their expressions. *Beats me.* Those pigs’ eyes were clouded with some kind of complaint, while my eyes swelled with compassion and mercy. Yeah, I’d give them exactly what they needed. *Hey, piggies. Time for a nice, long wash in the muddy, squishy swamp.*

I released the Holding and Earth magic I had been using on the ground. It was over. The ground collapsed. *’Cause this is a swamp? Ya know?*

“Gah, gah, gup! Gi’m gobinggggh…”

What was all this squealing about now? Conversation was important, surely, they had something they wanted to say, so I’d do them a favor and listen. Pig Dude was still squealing up a storm. Pig Dude was the first prince, apparently? Princely pigs had to be a rare entity, probably an

endangered and protected species, so I'd be in trouble if it just went and died. All that was up to Old Prince Dude, anyhow.

"What?! What is happening?! What did you—what did you do, you bastard! What?! *Whaaaaurrff!*"

He was being obnoxious, so I set his head on fire. *Old dude, the roots of your hair died long ago. Oops, now* you're *dead.*

I had never managed to set the nerds' heads on fire even once. The old dude didn't put up much of a fight.

"This was a swamp all along, you know?"

I didn't really do anything, and what I did do only allowed them to survive for a little longer. If even these random folks were going to start issuing false accusations against me despite my obvious innocence, I'd be in line for a never-ending lecture of never-ending lectures! Was I going to get yelled at over a few pigs?!

The pig army finally went quiet, and things were silent on our end too… Old Prince Dude couldn't speak, so I decided to send him back to Mr. Meridad's place. Mr. Meridad's army should be done with their preparations to leave for the capital by now.

I didn't mind him when he was all shut up like this, but at the same time, it was kinda gross to just have an old dude staring at me like that? *I'll do anything to stop old-dude BL from happening in this world!*

"This situation isn't tolerable any longer!" I cried. "I need to regroup with Miss Armor Rep and get my daily dose of replenishing (sexy) glares! I've been staring at old dudes all morning!"

She would have a meltdown at me if I forgot, so I made sure to recover her armor, picking up the first prince's gold effect-endowed armor while I was at it. I kept her armor from sinking with Holding, so it only took a few seconds. The drowned old dudes' equipment was now swampy and kept a serious old-man funk besides, so the girls didn't need it. I decided to leave it here.

The Old Prince Dude went back on to the carriage, still in silent shock. The other fighters in the Imperial Guard were going crazy. He was

completely powerless, but he was the acting king, technically… Eh, he was an old dude. Whatever.

"Okay, good luck and stuff, so just take care of the old man. It's important, right? Well, actually, I don't care, but just do it, 'kay?"

Why was he still staring at me? I didn't have anything I wanted from him, seriously! *I'll burn you if you don't stop creeping me out?* He was just staring blankly. He didn't get it. This prince went around totally oblivious, struggling in vain. Because he was powerless, the situation just got worse and worse. Still, he continued to struggle and paw, struggle and paw. He probably didn't realize that he had just saved the kingdom.

Because it was such an unseemly struggle, chances were high he didn't realize the depths of his pride, either. Or that his clumsy, unseemly, pathetic attempts to save the kingdom did have meaning.

"Your pride was about as worthless as dust, but the fact that you persisted in spite of the ridiculous extents of your sheer idiocy, weakness, worthlessness, and powerlessness… It all came back to that pride. Despite the world turning against you, everyone hating and judging and laughing at you…in the end, you showed the world your royal blood."

Give a stupid man a smart advisor, and everything will work out. Mr. Meridad knew how it rolled. Give a weak leader strong soldiers. I'd be taking his sexy female assassins, but we'd put up some applications, and he wasn't getting attacked anytime soon! And if you're stupid and weak, train up. Normally, the forced beating known as training resulted in some outstandingly effective growth.

All a king had to do was take pride in his nation and people. Even if he was skilled and wise, if he didn't care for the people, no-go, game over. That pride would become his legacy. If pride in nation and people didn't transmit to the next generation, his line would die out. Despite his miserable and pathetic pawing, he never forgot his people. In spite of his powerlessness, he thought that was the most obvious thing in the world. His pointless, idiotic pride. Through that pride, the kingdom had been saved.

"Although I guess Mr. Meridad and Princess Girl haven't given up, either."

With a stupid but prideful king, we could probably rebuild the kingdom in no time, so long as we could get rid of the turncoat nobles. *Kill all the traitors ASAP, am I right?*

"It would be a huge bummer if the kingdom fell before I even knew its name, so better to keep this one around rather than letting a new one with a new name pop up, I guess? If the enemy shows up, I'll just crush 'em."

If any more names popped up around here, I would be seriously ticked off. 'Cause I was having enough of a time remembering the name of this place… What was its name, again?

DAY 64

EVENING

It's not yet time to test out the true ultimate unstoppable power?

DIORELLE

NATIONAL ROAD

"HEEEEY, STALKER GIRL? How's the noble army sitch? Did Miss Armor Rep's Fear King strat work?"

"Ah, yes, everything's in order…more or less?"

It wasn't much of a strategy. Anyway, as a Dungeon Empress she was way worse than any Fear King to begin with!

"Seriously, how could there be a war with that armor around! If that showed up, I'd bolt the hell outta there! If I mass produce that armor, I could create an invincible army! I'd be embracing the villain role at that point, but still?"

We crushed the first prince, but he was just the pig-urehead. Which meant that the real force lay below, and that belonged to either the major noble houses or the church. Well, obviously it was the church.

The church was the one who would attack the domain even if we captured the prince. When I stopped the spellstone trade with the pseudo-dungeon to tempt the kingdom to come to the negotiating table, it turned out that the kingdom didn't have the rights at all. The real villain monopolizing the spellstones turned out to be the church. Which meant that the Theocracy was behind all of this. A real nasty behind, indeed.

"I don't want to cause any confusion, but as an individual who is not a fan of the church or the Theocracy, I still do love to worship at the altar of behinds. But what I don't like is the church, the Theocracy, and the God Dude. But worshipping from behind? I have no problem with that."

That made me quite the sinner, huh?

“Witnessing the line from the nape of the neck to the shoulders in smooth, supple white skin, to the curve of the back to the round, luscious behind, witnessing and gazing upon it and engaging with it, now that is a deep, large, hard, thick sin that must be pounded and thrust into oblivion. Ack—*nooooo*, don’t huurrrrt meeeee!”

The Fear God herself happened to show up. She didn’t knock on the door, but she did knock my ass out. My head smarted like hell. She skipped the knock and went straight to the knockout attack!

“Welcome back, Lord Armor Rep! Ya know? You look more like Lord Armor Demon, but if the plan’s all wrapped up, get changed! Please put on your favorite Platinum Armor, which I brought back just for you! Just take off the Spike Armor and put down the morning star and quit the evil villain attacks, they’re dangerous. I was talking about the church being *behind* all of this conflict, you know. It’s not all about our slippery time in the bucket last night together—I mean, it might sound exactly like that but it’s not, I swear! Catch my meaning?”

Her morning star came home before the rest of her, but after that, Miss Armor Rep finally showed up. Since when could the morning star attack from long range?!

“Do you always have that thing equipped?!”

She was pissed, but at least now I had my daily recommended serving of glares!

“The noble army has broken out into confusion,” Stalker Girl reported. “The Fear God strategy did its job. Rumors of a demon hunting for victims have begun to spread throughout the enemy camp, resulting in a general panic. Yes, that armor is scary. Half of our team broke down into tears. And any of the soldiers who tried to attack villages burst into manic sobs and ran away as fast as they could. Angelica-san was very upset the entire time. That concludes my report.”

Miss Armor Rep successfully carved fear into their hearts, only taking some minor psychological damage along the way. They did say that no bad deed goes unpunished, and that one bad turn (beating) deserves another, and after all the violent teachings I had received, I was ready to be a good boy, that’s for sure. No bad boys allowed, fortunately. ’Cause Miss Armor Rep massacred them.

“Can we withdraw our guerrilla forces for now, and retreat to the frontier for the time being?”

“They’re already stampeding away in terror,” Stalker Girl said.

We could launch a surprise attack from behind and burn ’em up, steal their food, equipment, and precious metals and then dash. But screwing that up could result in harm to innocent local villagers. Seriously, those armies weren’t full of soldiers. They were regular ol’ bandits.

“We consider them bandits as well. But attacking bandits from behind and stealing their provisions—what would that make *you*?”

I swore that I’d break their supply line, so if I did that and stepped in as the supplier I would ascend to Big Money status. Some people were sure to get ticked at me, though? But it was true that if I stole their stuff, they’d probably attack villages to resupply, so stealing their goods and selling them back to them would be like killing two birds with one stone and then eating those birds in a very tasty hotpot—literally the perfect plan!

“I’ll just put some Attack-class golems programmed for warfare and reconnaissance out there and ask them to defend the villages. I can plonk ’em down and let ’em do their job, since, y’know, they can self-destruct and all. They know how to run when they’re in danger, ya know? They’re equipped with spellstone flash-bomb status-ailment-inflicting hand grenades, and there are plenty of ’em?”

“There were plenty of those golems, yes, but their explosions and bursts didn’t work in battle, and instead the enemies were defeated via status ailments alone. Although they did get blasted in the end, that was just overkill, wasn’t it? They could only be stopped by getting thrown, at which point they would self-destruct, destroying the one who planned to stop the golems in the process. The result would be a permanent shutdown, so I don’t understand the point of the spellstone flash-bomb status-ailment-inflicting hand grenades in the end.”

Whatever! It sounded like it worked. Spellstone flash-bomb status-ailment-inflicting hand grenades were one-use items, so this plan was wasteful, but that was the minimal expense when it came to ensuring the villagers’ safety. Those golems should be more than enough to keep the bandits away, and more than enough to stop them if they did come. Our safety was secured. The enemy’s safety? They better start praying.

“They say that kindness heals all wounds, but I’m not so sure about those. Besides, our local god mentioned something about serious opportunities for profits?”

“Wh-what kind of god would talk about profit?!”

I thought that I’d need Miss Armor Rep to protect the villages, but her Fear God act was so effective that all the bad boys already got run outta town. They believed in all sorts of superstitions around here, so it was no wonder that a fear-based approach worked.

But was it okay to have a Dungeon Emperor masquerading as a measly king? It was kinda downplaying her true awe here, the burning of those eyes…huh? Why was everyone always suggesting that *I* should put on that armor? I couldn’t figure it out. Hey ho, time to go to the capital (sobbing).

Miss Armor Rep and I were handling this one; I didn’t know if Slimey would make it in time. He should be on his way back from the capital to meet us, but we were stuck waiting for the next stage to begin. The question was, when would the next roadblock appear?

“Hmm, nothing of concern, I see…”

“Excuse me, what are you doing here?”

I swung by the Adventurers’ Guild to check something. Three would be more than enough. Five meant “probably.” Nine was off by four. Five with one Miss Armor Rep technically meant four, but if Slimey made it in time, then three would do it. My classmates could handle one. But if Slimey made it in time, so would the nerds… And with all of us, then one was a guarantee. Which would leave two.

As for the frontier army and Princess Girl’s Imperial Guard…it was too dangerous for them.

“I guess it’s not gonna work, eh? Better go back and think it over.”

Yeah, I had no idea. ’Cause if Slimey didn’t make it in time, I’d have no choice but to give up on the sixth and seventh. If he showed up, we could win, and if we couldn’t…then I wouldn’t.

Class Rep and the rest of the girls would arrive at the capital tomorrow if they left tonight as a high-speed advance unit. It would be

tough for us to get coordinated by tomorrow night. Mr. Meridad's army would take longer than that, so I was better off making the arrangements myself. When they got here, the real fight would begin, so I'd better prep, plan, and polish before then. Battle prep was important, but prepping to *not* battle was even more important. That was the true battle.

"There are a bunch of towns and villages right near the capital," I said. "Sheesh, they're so wealthy it's hard to believe they're in the same country as the frontier."

"Diorelle is known as a dangerous kingdom, but besides Omui, it is mostly quite safe," Stalker Girl said.

"I guess before the neighboring domain turned into a ghost town they were richer than the frontier, so this is normal, huh?"

Then transport us here first, damn it! If the old god dude had sent us here that would've solved all our problems. What was the point of all my days in the forest?!

"This is like normal fantasy world stuff over here! Normally, you would go to the treacherous frontier *last*. That's for the final boss, goddamn it!"

This looked like a typical setting found in isekai adventure novels. There were villages and cities not too far away from each other, then you could go to the Adventurers' Guild, and then *after* a bunch of training you could go out to the forest and the dungeons…but nope, I got sent straight into the forest?! I took out the final boss Goblin Emperor as a part of my basic training, and then went back to my cave…which made *me* the real final boss?!

"If we had gotten sent here, we could've stayed at a normal inn, took normal jobs at a normal guild, found normal weapons, got normal strong. It would've been so freaking normal here! But no, the moment I stepped into a dungeon, boom, the *Dungeon Emperor herself* appeared!"

Even worse, the armory over there didn't have metal! There were no weapons. The guild had no jobs, and the inn was a pressure cooker of teenage girl bodies. And the first dungeon I went to had the Dungeon Emperor in it… There was clearly something wrong with the order of events here. The frontier was this fantasy game's hard mode!

We approached the capital.

“The true test of strength has come for me,” I said. “The might that I have forged day after day in this world… Now, at long last, I might be able to use it!”

Shake shake.

Or not? But what had been the point of all of my relentless training up until now, then? The answer was a mystery wrapped in an enigma and covered in a riddle, so even if I could slip my hand onto it for a shake, stroke, and jiggle, I would find the destination of this pointed, powerful, projecting…*hey, heeaaaaggghhhuurrrrfffugh!*

“Whoooooof. This is our incognito trip to the capital. I’m trying to keep the mood up so please put the morning star away, would ya? You’ll stand out way too much if you keep swinging that around! How did I end up sneaking into a place where I’m just gonna get killed by a morning star anyway?! I stood out too *little!* And that high-level morning star technique is definitely off-limits! Why don’t you go ask someone who’s gotten killed by a morning star how it happened ’cause that’s definitely not how it usually goes? Please!”

How is it possible for her to swing it around in complete silence? It’s so hard to dodge!

“How can a morning star come swinging at me without any sound or presence?!”

Miss Armor Rep clearly didn’t understand the meaning of incognito. I guess she wasn’t interested in playing the sexy spy for me… *Damn, and I was really looking forward to that in the bath!*

Dodging deadly, inadvertently silent (treatment) whips of the morning star, I advanced toward the capital with high-speed movement. Super high-speed! ’Cause if I didn’t, I’d get my head *thwonk*ed straight off.

The city was far off, but it slowly came into focus.

“It must be huge if we can see it from here. That’s the capital, and the big thing is the castle, in which case…we can just solve all of this if we cram into it and shut ourselves in there!”

As I continued to search for easy solutions, I decided to check out the surroundings. I risked getting noticed if I got any closer, so I slowed down and followed the road. The capital, huh? It was too far for a day trip, but with high-speed movement, who cared? Anywhere's a day trip! Not that there was much value in that.

"Still, it's like, way bigger than I was expecting?"

With so many residents in this massive city, I could make a fortune off of frontier pennants and wooden swords! *I gotta start prep immediately!*

"It's essential to keep on the grind, ya know? Some people want the slow and easy life, but if you keep grinding your ass off, you'll get somewhere!"

All of the stock I'd ground out, over and over, day in and out, had at last proven useful. The true power that I ground my ass off to obtain in this world—it was time to unleash it—the power of my side gigs! *Time to make a capital fortune!*

We should go with something like "Souvenir Shop Capital-Front Branch Ya Know?" as the name. Perfecto! I had an abundance of products and plenty of stock. Especially food and equipment. I just transferred my whole stock over to Murimuri Castle and all. Riches were on the way!

Swindle the capital à shortage of goods à sell at inflated prices à swindle again. It was the perfect scheme for infinite profits! The perfect scheme to maintain my fat-stacks life! As my wonderful life coach M-san always said, "If you don't have goods, steal 'em!" And I did have the goods, so I was a good goods guy. A good guy, in short! And once I sold, I'd swipe some more, stock up the souvenir store, rinse and repeat.

I had plenty of souvenirs and new product lines, and I'd built a high wooden stage to showcase my good(nes)s. Tomorrow my hard work would commence, and tonight I'd put some more hard(ness) into my hard work, in a lovely inn bedroom between me and Miss Armor Rep!

DAY 64

EVENING

A group of 16-year-old maidens came to break my window in the dead of night?

MURIMURI CASTLE

WE CONQUERED two more dungeons and went back to Murimuri Castle to ask Haruka-kun to do the hidden rooms for us. But when we got back, Haruka-kun was leaving so he could be on time to get handed over to the first prince.

"Why would you hurry to hand yourself over?!"

"Hey, it's the Old Prince Dude's plan, innit?"

"And a terrible plan at that! Why are you going along with it?!"

The boy on board with this terrible plan would only go on to do something even more terrible! His plans were 100 percent guaranteed to be Pandora's boxes of ultra-extra-high-concentration disastrous calamities!

"The guy getting handed over is crazy!"

"As is the one handing him over!"

"The risk of a three-way battle is way too high!"

That prince had no idea what he was doing, handing over Haruka-kun to the enemy!

"I think it'll be fine…even though I can't think of how it'll be okay at all!"

"Handing Haruka-kun over to the enemy…makes me feel bad for the enemy?"

"They're so screwed."

Something terrible was going to happen. I wished both of them would be a little more considerate to their allies and enemies alike. Once they handed him over, there was no stopping whatever came next.

“Hand *him* over and there’ll be no more room to discuss anything.”

“A bomb would be safer!”

“Not that you can have a discussion with *that* in the first place, right?”

It was obvious from the start that any negotiations were bound to fail. Once *that* got handed over, the enemy wouldn’t live long enough to see the end of a negotiation.

“This is a statement from Haruka-sama,” said Merielle-san. “‘Class Rep, let’s meet up at the capital. I’ll give you thirty helpings of manju and red bean paste! Ya know? Ya feel? Just tell her that? ’Kay?’”

Meropapa-san’s advisor was the one who passed it on to Merielle-san. Haruka-kun was already on the way to the capital.

“How can he be on his way to the capital if he’s getting handed over to the first prince?”

“And why is half of his message useless filler?”

“Why did the advisor even bother to remember that part?!”

It was a message riddled with mysteries.

“I guess we just have to go.”

“Yep, if we don’t, we won’t understand, plus…there’ll be red bean paste!”

“Yeah, I’m curious about it, so let’s go. To the red bean paste! I mean capital.”

“*To* the capital, *for* the red bean paste!”

By unanimous decision, we decided to go get the red bean paste. Maybe entering a war for the sake of red bean paste was a little unusual…? The princess and her maid were staring at us in confusion. They loved manju, though. If only they knew the wonders of red bean paste, they’d know how to react.

“According to the map, if we head straight to the capital… We won’t pass by the area where they planned to hand over Haruka-kun. Should we go straight there, or go out of our way to check?”

Haruka-kun had only taken the Imperial Guards who could handle high-speed movement. It was likely that they had already finished up with the first prince. It'd be better to hurry straight to the red bean paste—the capital, I mean. If we went the shortest possible route with high-speed movement, we should arrive sometime tomorrow night.

"The duke and his army have already left."

"The red bean paste might be in danger!"

We ate dinner in a hurry, rushed into the bath, and took a quick nap. We planned to depart in four hours, in the middle of the night. First thing in the morning would be safest, but we were all over level 100, and we'd have to travel at night either way. In the end, we decided to leave as soon as possible. The princess duo was also determined to join.

"Foodfoodfoodfoodfood!"

"Bathbathbathbathbath—midnight snack?"

We all ate way too much for dinner. Especially because there was no boot camp tonight. It made sense that we were eager to get on the road. It felt strange here without Haruka-kun. Sending us off with a 'have a good day,' then failing to be back to greet us when we came home… That was neglect. He was neglecting us!

"Should we send the army?"

"But we need to be the first thirty to arrive!"

We didn't know anything about the capital. Monsters were unlikely, but it was better to prepare for the worst.

"We could regularly send out an advance party for reconnaissance… but usually we'd avoid splitting up our force."

"Yeah, it's not a race. There are still less than thirty of us."

"And we're friends, right?"

The red bean paste had been straining the discussions, but fortunately everything was back on track.

"Red bean paste!"

"Let's gooooooooo!"

Everyone was getting pumped up. It was riling us up right before bed.

“Our objective: red bean paste! I mean the capital!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaaah!”

Was that really something to shout over? I mean, we were going after the red bean paste, but we should at least *say* ‘the capital’ first. We had the princess with us, after all.

With all that fuss, we were barely able to sleep. Thank goodness that our high levels meant we were pretty tough. I heard that once you got to over level 100, you could go for a week without sleep. That sounded bad for your skin, and plain exhausting, so I wasn’t going to do it, but it was good to know we could do it in an emergency.

“Time to go,” I called.

“Let’s goooo!”

We left Murimuri Castle in complete darkness. We could have borrowed horses and carriages, but there was no one around to drive them. At this distance, running would be faster. That was another benefit of being level 100—overwhelming high-speed movement. Well, a level 21 kid still left us in the dust, but we were pretty fast by most people’s standards—right?

With the kingdom princess, her maid, and the frontier princess Merielle-san, there were twenty-three of us. The two princesses were under level 100, but were still faster than some members of our rearguard. The important thing was that they were still high level, so we could book it. Our objectives were waiting for us in the capital—red bean paste and manju!

“No enemy presence ahead.”

“There are a lot of towns and villages, but no enemies.”

The volleyball girls scouted ahead and reported the situation. I decided to send out one party at a time as scouts, but there were no enemies by the roadside. No enemy troops in sight. Still, we had a long way to go, considering how we started at the very edge of the kingdom.

“Got it. The student rep party is going to scout next, so pass the command on to Book Club President and the princess, okay?”

“Leave it to me.”

“Of course.”

The sky was bright. The sun climbed high into the sky.

“This is going smoother than expected, right?”

“Besides the frontier, there are barely any monsters.”

“At this rate, we should get there tonight!”

“Yes! To the red bean paste!”

Haruka-kun had added Super-Speed and Speed-Up to all of our equipment, so we were even faster than expected. Well, our equipment was created to help us protect Haruka-kun, so it needed to be fast above all else. Our boots and anklets were also speed-oriented, and he passed on similar equipment to the princess and the others, too.

“All clear, now it’s Shimazaki-san’s party’s turn.”

“We’re on it. We should be in the capital’s territory soon—do you think we should scout a wider radius?”

Nobles would pop up more frequently in the territory ahead. But even if they saw us, they shouldn’t be able to catch up with us, so it should be fine. *Let’s hurry.*

“Just scout ahead,” I told them. “If they spot us and chase after us, we’ll just ignore them. Let’s go!”

“Got it. We’ll head out now.”

“Be careful!”

The Servitude-bound party set out. This morning we ate hamburgers that Haruka-kun made while we traveled. But what should we do for lunch?

I hastily called together a high-speed movement girls’ meeting. We could eat the rice balls and karaage chicken while still traveling, so why did Haruka-kun also prepare beef-over-rice bento? Girls who chowed down on beef-on-rice while still running…not cute! Was that what Haruka-kun had in mind? Sure, beef-on-rice was fast food, but that didn’t mean it should be eaten at high speeds!

TL;DR: We were hungry, so we ate the beef-on-rice as we ran. No one was there to witness it, so it was fine. Even maidens are allowed to eat beef-on-rice standing up, but scarfing it down while *running* was really tough to justify.

"Capital sighted!"

"It's huge, so it's still far off, but we can see it!"

"Could you sense Haruka-kun?"

"No, too far."

Night had fallen. As midnight drew near, we finally spotted the capital from a long way off. We knew that finding Haruka-kun would be a lot more comfortable than setting up tents. He had that tent that could change size, and he even stored furniture in his item bag so he could move house at a moment's notice. He walked around with a literal bath. Three kinds of baths!

"No presence nearby!"

"Should we split up?"

"It's okay for us to slow down now. I'd rather stay together and do a once-around the capital."

"Got it!"

Everyone was excited to meet up with Haruka-kun again. A comfortable life, delicious meals, wonderful clothes. Everything a girl could ever want, he had it. I was worried that we might end up volunteering to be his servants. If he said he would give us red bean paste to be his servants, heck, we might line up to apply.

We approached the towering city walls and saw a posted sign: "Souvenir Shop Capital-Front Branch Ya Know?" Oh my god! The culprit —he was here!

"We're onto him."

"Yah!"

"Oh yeah, this place, like, *definitely* confirms it," purred Vice Rep B.

The girls who were using Presence Sensing toppled over one by one with steam blowing out of their ears. Yup, it was about that time of night…

Our virgin eyes!

"Oh, hey, guys! Dang, you were fast! You must've been going over 100 kilometers per hour to get here in one day, ya know? Just don't break the glass windows on my souvenir shop, 'kay? Welcome, come on in, yada yada, all the rest."

Angelica-san was inside. I was so tired, I felt exhaustion all over…as Angelica-san greeted us, clad in as sexy a see-through mini-dress as I had ever seen, with an obscene, lascivious, dreamy smile to match. She looked on the verge of melting with satisfaction.

She beckoned us inside, but that was way too dangerous for us maidens. There was only one giant bed! The whole floor of his room was a bed, actually, and getting onto that bed could mean the end of the maidenhood of every last one of us. Anywhere but that bed!

DAY ?

OMUI CITY

So this is the romantic development in a young noble girls' fantasy world life where we stamp our feet together?

DUKE'S PALACE

THE LADY DEPARTED with a glimmering smile, her golden hair shimmering in the wind like rays of sunshine. Surrounded by friends, smiling with joy—truly, a perfect vision of "happily ever after." The dream that the lady always hoped for.

This was the young lady's dream ever since she was little. I, for my part, could only see her longing as a firm but tragic resolve. The road ahead was too harsh for a young girl. For now she was so happy, surrounded by such dear friends… Miss Merielle must be the happiest of all. She had been so desperate. She had a martyr's resolve. But now Miss Merielle was so happy, her heart so freed. She stomped around like a carefree young girl as she played.

I'd pined for the glorious princess knight Murimoor ever since I was young. I had heard countless legends of a beauteous princess knight in the frontier my whole life. The songs and the plays of her and the young Meropapa, successor to the dukedom, made my heart dance within my young breast. As weak in body as I was, my heart yearned after them both.

Then, when Lady Murimoor departed for the frontier to be Lord Meropapa's bride, everyone rejoiced. Festivals commenced. As kind as she was, she took just a few soldiers on her way, saving villages from monsters on her journey, risking her life to halt the fiends and evacuate innocents… And though lives were lost, in the end, happiness came. In the days when we wept and mourned and languished in sorrow, happiness had at long last come to the frontier.

Then, Lord Meropapa, a man who had devoted his sword to the kingdom, succeeded to rule Omui. The noble knight Lady Murimoor wed

him. A celebratory spirit swept across the frontier. We were poor, but everyone rejoiced for the sake of the warriors who fought tirelessly to save the lives of the citizens of the frontier.

This was the beginning of our ruin.

The sword of the kingdom Lord Meropapa and the noble knight Lady Murimoor led the frontier. They had the power we needed to combat the monsters, and their marriage rang in a sudden peace across the realm.

The power to bloodlessly enforce a peace is feared, and rightfully so. The nobles of the kingdom, who already plundered the minimal aid that did go to the frontier, became paranoid. Two great powers residing in the frontier became a threat. All aid from the capital to the frontier was cut off. All of the weapons and materials needed to fight, gone.

The kingdom isolated the frontier. The frontier from which such great heroes had been raised had been betrayed. The virtual embargo sapped the strength of the frontier day by day. And while Lord Meropapa exhausted all of his might for the sake of the capital, the capital cut off all relations with him. All of his friends in Diorelle turned away with a horrible finality.

One tragedy led to the next. After giving birth, Lady Murimoor fell ill and had to resign from the battlefield. What sorrow and relief I felt when I heard! The forest of monsters grew each passing day, consuming more and more lives, and without proper weapons to fight, I didn't want Lord Meropapa and Lady Murimoor to fight on the front lines. It was a cowardly relief.

However, the young Lady Merielle suffered most of all. She realized from a young age that her birth was the reason the legendary noble knight Murimoor could no longer fight, and so she shouldered the heavy responsibility of gripping the blade in her mother's place to protect the frontier. She tried with all her might to get stronger. Rather than being content with her own strength, she needed to be as strong as herself and her mother combined. She skipped lunch and sleep to train with all her might.

Though she has since been rightfully recognized as a dual-sword master, for a long while she tried to be exactly like her mother. When she learned she did not have the frame to wield a greatsword as Lady Murimoor had, she cried for three days and nights. Then, the next morning, she began her training with daggers.

Her devotion was single-minded. When I went to observe her one day, I saw she had begun her dual-style training. Even after her dreams were shattered, she didn't give up. She simply wanted to fight for her mother's sake. I watched her determination from a distance, as her small hands gripped the daggers and swung, swung, swung.

But Her Highness, who punished herself and cursed herself to obtain such strength… One day, she vanished as if she'd always been a dream. Her heroic nature dissolved as if possessed by a demon. Her change was as peculiar and as mysterious as any I had ever witnessed—and the source was a black-haired boy who could run across the sky. He had showed her true strength.

"It was the boy! He was skinny and frail compared to the bandits, and yet he dodged their attacks as if he were the rushing wind, the flowing water! He taunted them as if it were all a game… He was a mere level 9! It should be too dangerous for him to even go outside…but he completely outclassed me! And he would *not* remember my name!"

Until that day, she had been mature and over-serious. She had not permitted herself to be a child. *That* Lady Merielle was throwing a temper tantrum, stomping her feet. I was so happy to see a girlish expression on her face. A look appropriate to her age.

She was a teenage girl who preferred to wear light, simple clothes for fighting, and requested the bare minimum of equipment she could get away with considering her station as a duke's daughter. That was all she allowed herself. To see the stubborn lady herself wearing a dress…to see her to lose control of her emotions and stamp her feet on the floor! I wept. I wept fresh tears.

Now, the young lady went out with a smile, wearing a dress, with two swords slung across her back.

The young lady surpassed even the legends of the noble knight Lady Murimoor. She had mastered the art of dungeon-slaying with the "girls' group," consigning monsters to oblivion with a might that foreign powers should rightfully fear. Surrounded by beautiful, dazzling, black-haired warriors, Lady Merielle came to match their beauty. She also grew to match the speed of that black-eyed calamity named Haruka.

Yes, that calamity had made remarkable improvements to this palace. He made maps for our explorers, reformed our extermination forces. It was a bit of an issue that people found it easier to get lost within the palace's new maze-like structure, but oh well. He even expanded the dungeons. I had better request that the exploration corps bring emergency stores to make preparations for the search corps.

I sighed and gazed out the window. I placed a whisper on the wind, sent it out to the girl with flowing golden hair who laughed merrily with her group of black-haired beauties: *You've already achieved more than your wildest dreams, you know.* You have already reached the status of a legend. And yet you still surge forward, on toward these dark-haired powers that you'll never reach, and the boy whom you will never overtake.

Despite his strength, whenever I called the boy, he always came running to me at once. Perhaps he had a soft spot for old men.

DAY 65

MORNING

Apparently, it's pretty rare for the daily special to be for today only.

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

WE WERE SO EXHAUSTED from running all day that after we took a bath, we fell asleep right away. Yup, he'd prepared a giant girls-only bath, as expected.

And, as we feared, there was nothing but that lone, single, giant, deadly floor bed. Despite the terrible, relentless danger, we slept. Call it a teenaged superpower.

"Good morning, Haruka-kun," I said. "I forgot to ask since I'm so used to it at this point but…what's with this crazy fortress?!"

"Building a fortress in the middle of the capital is like prepping for fortress-to-fortress combat!"

"Why would the fortresses fight each other?!"

"And why is your shop called 'Souvenir Shop Capital-Front Branch Ya Know?' Anyone who looks at that sign is gonna think the store is called 'Ya Know?'!"

I forgot because of the initial late-night shock, but he'd built a fort right in the middle of the capital… It was as good as a declaration of war!

"Ah, good morning Class Rep! You're looking very Class Reppy today. I've made breakfast, and after breakfast I have the thirty portions of red-bean-paste manju prepared as requested. The boot camp boss has made arrangements to train (beat) the living daylights outta you. And the store's about to close anyway, so it doesn't need a name, right?"

"You just opened it yesterday and you're already gonna close it?!"

We'd always planned to stay in the frontier, and Haruka-kun felt the same way. But…he built a brand new store and had absolutely no intention of remembering its name!

"Has the army gotten here yet? I can go have a look."

"Yeah, we better wait for them, right?"

The capital stretched before me, its gates closed tight against outside threat. Within it was the second prince and his army, the Second Royal Division, which we had to either defeat or convince to stand down. We couldn't just launch a sudden attack—we brought the princess with us for that reason. Negotiations were possible, but we couldn't just make a move without Duke Omui either. When he arrived, it would be with the kingdom representative, which could complicate things.

In normal circumstances, if a fortress suddenly appeared out of nowhere, the curious and important figures of a city might come to check it out. And that was exactly what happened—soldiers and government officials were poking around outside.

"This is built with the express written permission of His High Royal Highness, representative of Diorelle," Haruka-kun said. "This store was built for the purpose of solving the spellstone shortage in the capital. It was built with this size to repel any bandits with intentions of stealing the massive number of spellstones hidden within. Naturally, if the heir to the throne-ascendant second prince Lord Grande-Venti does not approve, we shall immediately retreat back to the frontier. We only exist here to sell spellstones and other wares to the capital at a fair and honest price."

It was the perfect script. The capital was dying to get their hands on spellstones, and since the second prince hadn't technically taken the throne yet, they couldn't object. The capital was, above all else, desperately in need of food and armaments. They'd be reluctant to shut down a store, no matter how suspicious. And if they did attack, they'd lose the frontier's imports altogether, so it was better for them to strike a deal. It was their only option.

"Th-that…"

"It's the king's seal!"

"Hurry! Send news!"

Good thing they'd investigated so quickly. Haruka-kun hit them with the perfect line. He seemed to be gearing up for the hard sell. Still, he was basically incomprehensible, and any diplomat they sent to talk to him would probably just get bonked hard and killed.

"Does he think he's going to negotiate when he barely makes any sense?"

"He can write normally, so why does he talk like this?!"

"At least we're here to translate this time."

After the official inspection and negotiation, Haruka-kun's squad came back with fresh stock. They'd even secured a safe delivery route. But the girls who helped out with the restocking were glaring—*yikes, that's a glare that's hard to meet!*

"Hey, if the door's locked, it's only natural to wanna open it, right?" Haruka-kun said. "I mean, with all the traps to prevent intruders and stuff. But I just felt like it was my only chance to do my thing. If there's a keyhole, I'm gonna use the key on it, ya feel?"

Illegal entry.

"See, I'm not the bad guy! What's a stock for if not for *me* to stock it? Right? No, I'm just gonna grab it, take it over here, and sell it, just like a normal business. I unlocked the door, entered, exited. Everything! If it was unlockable, that must mean it was mine to take, yeah?"

Blatant acts of thievery.

"It can open, so I opened it, and since it was already open at that point, I entered, and it was there for the taking, so I took it. The most natural thing in the world, ya know? Just normal, natural economic practice, sell your stock and stock back up when it runs out. I sold it to you, so obviously you needed it? And if I have the key, then it's basically a free for all once I'm in there!"

Yup, Haruka-kun found a way through the walls here in the unseizable capital of Diorelle. It was called "unseizable" because of its magic protections. The kingdom had two supreme defensive treasures for keeping the capital under lock and key: "Ultimate Lock: An impenetrable seal executed over a designated area. Perfect Defense. Perfect Intruder

Protection" and "Eternal Trap: Creates traps over a designated area for all of eternity."

It was supposed to be impossible to enter the capital because of these measures. You couldn't force your way in either. Even if you could manage it, you'd get swallowed up by the traps. Without the key to unlock the Ultimate Lock, you couldn't get in. It was a perfect, impenetrable defense. We'd spent hours fretting, worrying about how to get inside the capital… and Haruka-kun had just waltzed in.

"He went in, took food and equipment with him, and came back?"

"He had been waiting for the chance to use an item he got back in the Ultimate Dungeon that he never had a chance to use before… 'Magic Key LvMax: Opens any lock up to and including LvMax.'"

Yep, he used an Ultimate Dungeon lower-level-class item to unlock the impenetrable, supreme defenses of Diorelle. He'd opened the Ultimate Lock.

"Pretty fantastic fantasy development, right? That item I got at the bottom of the Ultimate Dungeon—I had always wondered what the point of it was. It's for restocking my souvenir shop!"

It was plunder going by the name of restocking.

"But anyone without permission should have no way to pass. There's still the Eternal Trap which generates endless new traps—"

"Oh yeah, I also got the 'Trap Ring: Automatically deactivates traps' so none of them activated," Haruka-kun said with a shrug. "All right, now to stock up…"

Yes, the supreme, impenetrable, unpassable, undefeatable defensive treasures had faced their match: the manager of an unethical souvenir store that stocked its shelves via robbery!

"I just normally strolled in, unlocked the door like a normal guy, grabbed the stuff like normal…they even gave me a hand, like you'd normally expect?"

"That's normally a crime!" we shouted.

When you approached the magic forcefield surrounding the capital, a keyhole appeared. Until you unlocked that, it was impossible to enter the

capital, so they had no other defenses. There was only one person in the world who could unlock it at will. Of course they believed in those defenses…they were the mythical treasures of the kingdom, extolled in legend for all time. Haruka-kun got past them with some dungeon loot and sauntered straight in.

"I suppose if you use common sense, it'd be impossible to get in, but you have to remember that some people don't obey common sense in this world. They should've had *some* back-up defenses."

"I'd feel pretty bad for any back-up defenses that got in his way. Still, it's negligent not to even try."

He strolled by all the traps set at every important point by the Eternal Trap without anything happening, not a single trap going off, and then he "just so happened" to pick up the goods before wandering back here. Just busted through Diorelle's legendary defenses to grab a few trinkets for sale. If this wasn't robbery, what was?

"Our impenetrable capital, our pristine Diorelle…"

"Don't worry! Regular people still can't break in," we called.

"We would've been in trouble on the way here without the Map skill, too."

When he said they'd secured a safe delivery route, that just meant they had secured a safe robbery route! And nothing else! That was all he cared about.

"They stole it first, so it was stolen goods from the outset! The second prince usurped the throne, remember? I just came to confiscate stolen goods, so I hauled it all with the sweat of my brow, ya know. Obviously. If hard work's a crime, then ants are the world's most wanted criminals! Look at how hard I worked moving all this crap! So I'm not the bad guy. I'm a heroic child laborer!"

Haruka-kun always took a firm stance against crime, as long as he could define what "crime" meant.

On the one hand, he was a terror to bad guys everywhere. On the other hand, he was a grifter. There was no way you could say that he *wasn't*

bad… But he put his profits to good use, so even his most distasteful deeds looked pretty virtuous if you squinted. It was an optical illusion!

He repaid evil unto evil, and somehow it always evened out to something like justice. Shalliceres-san and the others who weren't immune to his tricks yet didn't see the problems with it yet. *You all really have to wise up, you know?*

Then, in the midst of a bustling throng, business began. We were paid for our work that day with our daily rations of clothes and sweets. Today, that included *crêpes!* They were still prototype products, but as employees, he promised to give us the samples! We all signed up for the job. *At this rate, we'll fall into Servitude!* But so what? Blueberry jelly crêpes were on the line!

"Thank you for coming!" we called, as customers poured in. Goods were flying off the shelves. The city's soldiers and nobles alike rushed in from the impenetrable capital and combed the store dry for everything they needed.

"One manju per person, max!"

"'Cause we can't sell out of those, right?"

"If you buy five Frontier Wooden Swords, you'll get a mushroom doll for free! With six varieties of mushroom dolls, try to get 'em all!"

"Large-scale orders from government officials, please see the special counter in the back. Large-scale orders, please see the special counter in the back."

"Like, check out our daily special, guys! It's an F-class medicinal potion for, like, 3,000 ele! Normally it's, like…4,000 ele!"

People kept coming. The line stretched on and on, and they kept on buying.

"It's so busy!"

"I'm gonna lose weight working here!"

These sales were incredible. This wasn't the desperate frontier anymore—the exact opposite. They had money, but no goods. They couldn't get ahold of even the essentials. On the other hand, the capital had been stockpiling equipment and weapons like crazy, so they sold tons of

them to us. Just how many people in the frontier could these have saved? Just how much suffering could have been averted?

"Yeah, the economic circulation is crap here. There are too many regulations from the nobles. They're taxing the life out of circulation, so everyone ends up suffering. The nobles have been penniless all along, so there's no problem stealing from the capital. We're stealing to sell, so it improves the economy? Look how happy everyone is to buy, and look how happy I am to be a millionaire! Ya know?"

The scariest thing of all was that for a second, it almost made sense. Taking him seriously exploded logic into little pieces. If you didn't think about it, he seemed like a hero. Even scarier than that was the fact that, at least this time, he was right.

"The frontier pennants are all sold out! We only have mushroom pennant stock left!"

"Four packs of mystery-bird karaage, two packs of croquettes. That will be 5,200 ele, please."

"Fresh shipment of buckets, baskets, wash bins, and pots! They're on display in the back right corner. Limited specials!"

Haruka-kun was going into overdrive side-hustle mode to mass-produce items, practically making the goods to match orders, all while cooking at the same time. Then, when he had a few minutes to spare, he went to grab more stock from the capital. The barrels of grain that the people from Diorelle Castle bought ended up back in the store front. That was why our stock never ran out—our backroom stock was the castle's storehouse.

"The Merchant Kingdom is probably behind all of this. If not, people would have ample supply. Prices are gonna shoot up if you shut off supply to a country without production capabilities! Obviously! So the Merchant Kingdoms have been smuggling in supplies to the second prince, and I'm happy to take it off their hands. Great goodness gracious!"

The only one losing here was the Merchant Kingdom. Their smuggled-in aid went straight to Haruka-kun's pockets. Now Diorelle had no choice but to buy from Haruka-kun. They had every luxury in the world, but what they needed were bread and milk. So Haruka-kun skimmed the

cream off the top. Until the Merchant Kingdom pulled out of Diorelle, Haruka-kun could keep eating up their supplies.

"What greed!"

In the short run, the capital would lose a ton of capital. Haruka-kun would clean up, but the big loser was the Merchant Kingdom. The alliance of merchants worked for profit in the end, so they wouldn't be pleased to find their investments had been eaten up.

If they sent an army, they'd get obliterated, and now their only weapon—their economic might—was getting torn up as well. Haruka-kun was side-stepping their strengths. Still, involving them directly? That could be trouble. They would be better off avoiding the kingdom now, if possible. Getting involved with Haruka-kun would only lead to their absolute ruin.

He stole way more than just the value of his burgled goods. He wasn't some Robin Hood, or some military conqueror, an evil demon king, or a corrupt revolutionary. None of those. He was just a con artist. Mess with him and get conned. And if they didn't want to get conned…then they should've left the kingdom in peace.

"But the Merchant Kingdom is an alliance of business enterprises, so even if we steal their resources, it'll just be a drop in the bucket for them, right? Still, they'll definitely bristle at the idea of losing money. No one wants to hand out money on a losing investment."

"Makes sense."

"They're handing out money in the hopes of profiting, so if they're taking a loss, then they'll stop handing it out. And if they can't make more profits, then they'll lose fighting power, and 'cause they're an alliance of merchants, if one tries to boss the others around, they'll start fighting and fracture?"

"You're trying to put pressure on merchants, right? Make them take a loss!"

"All this is just an excuse for ripping them off, isn't it?"

"Hey, they may call themselves merchants, but if they're using their commerce for political ends it's fair game. 'Cause if they get ripped off in commerce they'll lose power, too? You all underestimate the power of

commerce. Commerce and making a buck are two totally different things," Haruka-kun said.

Money could be used to hire merchants, military strength could be used to establish a nation. Commerce funded it all. So if we didn't crush them with commerce, they could crush us with war or politics. Still, I'd like to see them try. Because a certain Dungeon Empress was bagging like crazy, and the nation's princess was rushing around restocking inventory. Next to them, a duke's daughter sold hamburgers. The rest of us level 100+ adventurers were store staff!

This was the most powerful souvenir shop in the world. It'd be more than a little alarming if there were a stronger one. All of us were invincible. Come at us, I dare you!

DAY 65

NOON

A teenage boy who flirts with flowers has sex appeal straight out of a fairy tale, apparently?

DIORELLE CAPITAL

DIORELLE CASTLE OFFICE

THE MASSES WERE STARTING to get restless. Just a few days after economic lockdown began, prices soared. We received goods from the Merchant Kingdom and put it on the market, but amid such overwhelming demand, it vanished as quickly as we received it.

But we could not open our city gates. We could not stave off the church's army without the protection of the Ultimate Lock; opening our gates would be fatal. Our magic was less sophisticated, and the first prince's army outnumbered our own.

"A fortress-like shop has been erected outside the walls. It is called 'Souvenir Shop Capital-Front Branch Ya Know?' With permission from the chancellor, representative of the kingdom, it has been established for the purposes of introducing spellstones into the Diorelle market. What shall we do?"

And that chancellor succeeded. This wasn't just a shoddy supply of spellstones—this might turn our fortunes. If all the spellstones were bought and the Merchant Kingdom traded them with the church, we would lose our only bargaining chip. An additional factor: if the frontier held out, that might end up being a trump card for the second prince. I couldn't deduce who this benefitted most, but if we could obtain spellstones, they certainly would grant us a distinct advantage.

"Obtain those spellstones for the kingdom, and negotiate exclusive rights. We must be the exclusive benefactors. Try to buy them for as cheap as you can. But what is this 'Souvenir Shop'?"

“They sell mushrooms and spellstones obtained from the frontier, and their assortment of food and supplies is far more varied than our own. In addition, all of the products are high-quality.”

Intriguing. Perhaps that could help out the shortage of goods here. We could not control the emotions of a throng of people with logic—but new luxuries could be a powerful influence. Potentially, this could consume wealth of the kingdom, but we had no other options. Thankfully, we needed no other as long as we could obtain spellstones again.

“What is the prince doing? We must hurry!”

“He is currently holding meetings with the nobles in the capital, attempting to foster treaties.”

If we didn’t obtain half—no, at least a third of the nobles’ backing—the Merchant Kingdom would discard us, and then we would be doomed. This was a do-or-die moment.

Ours was a shrewd prince, and I knew he was better than his pigheaded older brother. The chancellor’s heart was in the right place, but he was an expert incompetent, so the second prince was our only hope. Still, I couldn’t trust him. His shield was too unreliable. A clumsy alliance with the Merchant Kingdom could bring us completely under their thumb. All of this would be futile, in any case, if we couldn’t protect the capital where our people and our king dwelled.

“It is true that only the Merchant Kingdom has the power to keep the church in check.”

Between the Theocracy and the Merchant Kingdom, we were squeezed to the point of suffocation. We must at least attempt an escape.

“The frontier…they have stock of mushrooms, you say?”

“Yes. They are selling the mushrooms.”

Even low-class mushrooms could potentially cure the king. We could not afford to be arrogant about the class of care he received, not at this stage. Even if this was just a sliver of hope, we had to act.

“Take me there. A small squadron of soldiers will do.”

“We will begin preparations at once, my lord!”

I'm grasping at straws… Even if the king recovered, the problem of succession would remain. But with time, we could still teach the three younger princes to grow into candidates for a wise and worthy ruler. There was still a chance of that. And if the king were to make a full recovery, the present crisis would be forestalled. These problems arose from relying too much on the princes. Better to rely once more on our king.

It was foolish to stake our hopes on such a miracle, and I could not bring myself to pray to that church's god. But if it was a miracle we needed, then I much preferred to place my faith in the Souvenir Shop's mushrooms.

"I had given up on obtaining frontier mushrooms. I'll forget about quality and get as many as I can…"

Even if there weren't many to be had, perhaps we could arrange to obtain more. The next worrying matter: the price. If they did have high-class mushrooms, we could expect the price to be terrifyingly high to match. I could not get my hopes up too high…but I decided to bring the treasure of our house, nonetheless. This was too much to hope for—far too much—but now that there was a chance, I could not help but to dream.

"Preparations are complete."

"Very well. Take me there."

The moment we stepped outside of the capital, I saw a throng. Outside of the lifeless capital, a crowd of people bustled. The weary atmosphere had dissolved, producing a lively hubbub of commoners surrounding the store.

"C-commoners outside of the city walls?"

If the enemy launched an attack now, we would all perish!

"Shall we order the civilians to leave? If we line up, we'll be waiting for some time."

"That will not do," I said. "If the people feel safe here, then we cannot disrupt this place."

It was only natural for the populace to feel an allyship with Duke Omui and the frontier. The shield of Diorelle against the forest of monsters, the sword of the kingdom and continent. Every noble and commoner knew that the true heroes of the land fought tirelessly against the demons on the

frontier…that it stood between us and the follies of other nations, or indeed, knew of its role in saving the kingdom from itself at times.

The frontier souvenir shop opened. The moment supply seemed to run low, an enormous shipment of goods came in. Everyone must have felt like the frontier saved the day. I would not stoop to disrupting the good spirits of the common folk in such dire times.

"If it's a frontier store, perhaps we can also use it to make contact with Duke Omui."

The frontier must've grown wealthy beyond all of our imaginings. There was no way we would be able to make contact via a mere souvenir shop. We waited for a long while in the long line, but the moment we stepped inside, my jaw dropped, with no hope of shutting. My bodyguards were the same; they stared, wide-eyed, around the store. I could tell from their faces that if they had forgotten they were guarding me, they would've rushed straight into the aisles to shop. They couldn't take their eyes off the merchandise.

"Oh, if it isn't Lord Terisel. Welcome! How about a hamburger? They're delicious!"

Someone called out to me the moment I stepped into the store. How strange. I didn't know anyone from the frontier—wha?!

"L-L-Lady M-Merielle…is that you? Why, *why* in the world is the duke's daughter, the lady of the frontier, s-selling hamburgers?! With your own hands—*what*?!"

The daughter of the God of War. The ultimate dual-wielding princess, the young lady of the frontier, Merielle sim Omui. The subject of songs of valor, here, selling hamburgers in a souvenir shop. She crudely pointed at something…

When I followed her finger, I saw…a young woman who looked exactly like the missing Princess Shalliceres du Diorelle stocking shelves. *Yes, she does look just like*—no! It was actually her! Two of the most beautiful young ladies in the realm, employed at this frontier souvenir shop…looking around, I shuddered. All of the workers in this store were sublime beauties! And strong beyond compare!

This wasn't a souvenir shop. This was an elite vanguard—a peerless troop of warriors.

"Please, come this way."

I was led to a luxurious meeting room. Even the king's study in the castle paled in comparison to the splendor of the ornamentation, but it retained a harmonious sophistication that wasn't gaudy.

The hamburgers that Lady Merielle sold were delicious indeed. A sumptuous, balanced taste.

Harmony. These products were designed with deep wisdom and learning, they expressed sophistication accumulated over countless years and experiences. Just who could create such wonders that expressed the pinnacle of experience? I looked at all of the store workers. Who was the creator of this masterpiece?

"Lord Terisel. How is everything? The state of the capital, the health of my father, the movements of the nobles? Oh—and the monkey?"

"Milady! I am so relieved that you are safe! All is quiet in the capital, but the state of economic deterioration is a concern, and we are still investigating the Theocracy and the Merchant Kingdom. The nobles are waiting for their opportunity. The monkey…ahem, the prince is currently negotiating with the nobles. Also, there is no change to His Majesty's health at this juncture. Upon the rumor that we might obtain mushrooms here, we came to purchase them at this store."

"I see. Give my apologies to my father. I hope the mushrooms work! I will ready you our very finest."

"Thank you."

She made it back. Her Royal Highness The Princess General, the Sword Princess Shalliceres. Now the army could muster behind her. The First and Second Royal Divisions would remain with the first and second princes respectively, but now the Third would likely split between a pro-noble and pro-royal faction. And the fact that she was here with Lady Merielle—did that mean that the God of War, Duke Meropapa, was on her side?

But I must not dream, I must not hope, I thought. *Military men look only at the facts, then choose the best option.* But now, this unfathomable souvenir shop presented an option. But there was no way that Duke Omui had left his domain. *Especially not with the first prince's army advancing as we speak.*

There were special troops supplied by the Merchant Kingdom currently in the capital to consider. If they found out, the king's life would be in danger, and perhaps the entire kingdom as well. If the prince found out, he would surely leak the information to the Merchant Kingdom. If the princess and Lady Merielle remained inside this fortress-like building, they would be safe from direct attack, but there was still the risk of assassination…although could that be what these incredibly strong salesgirls were here for?

"Uh, thanks for coming to our shop 'n' stuff! You're a Second Division top dog? Top dogs talk *forever*, which sucks, but I don't mind talking doggystyle. I thought my conversation with the rafflesia was gonna go on for ages…even though it wasn't even human, you dig? It couldn't even talk! I was about to be BFFs with a fellow tentacle savant, but being tentacle buds would definitely put my sex appeal into all-out stealth mode. Don't worry, though, it's very much present, I swear! And hey, thanks for coming? Ya know?"

After interacting with tedious nobles of all sorts, and making my way through a strict hierarchy in a military society, I sensed it immediately. This boy was in charge. He treated the royal army like dogs, and he had the capacity to enter all-out stealth mode. Even in a room with the princess and Lady Merielle, his was the most commanding presence. But if he stood one step above even the princess herself…who was this boy?

"An honor to meet you. I am the Captain of the Second Royal Division, Terisel. I have graced your souvenir shop, but as I am nobody of great importance whatsoever, there is no need to humble yourself in my meager presence."

The fabled lady of the frontier, the legendary Princess General and mighty Swordsmaster—they paled in comparison to him. His look was unassuming to say the least. He was a boy with black hair and black eyes dressed in a shabby black cloak.

“The Merchant Kingdom? They’re in the capital ’n’ stuff, right? Just how far are they tryin’ to go? Not their immediate objective, but their overall goal? Is there like hidden treasure and riches and stuff that you know about?”

He behaved himself without restraint around both princesses, from the frontier and Diorelle. Perhaps he was someone of importance in disguise? And the young women in the store—they had inky, glossy hair as black as crow feathers, and their eyes shone like glimmering, polished onyx. There were no commoners in Diorelle with such features. These were no ordinary girls. They stood on par with the two princesses, but in comparison to other nobles or royalty, they stood on a different plane altogether. Certainly a higher caliber than the monkey, the pig, or even—I permitted myself to admit—His Majesty.

I decided I would not offend this mysterious boy.

“Can’t they just attack straight on? And if they’re gonna go for our weak points, can you please tell them to send some assassins or kidnappers? I’d love to get kidnapped! I’ve never gotten kidnapped even once! What I would give to get chased around by a sexy female assassin trying to kidnap me! I’m gonna go get myself an invitation. So, where are the sexy female kidnappers around here?! You can’t put a price on that! Unless you call it a ransom, I guess, and then you can?”

Even when he donned the mask of mischief, I caught his insight flashing, keen as any blade. His brief analysis perfectly captured the enemy’s next move: to hire assassins. Judging from his enemy’s troops and objectives, a spy to conduct reconnaissance might precede the assassins.

This young man told me he was affiliated with a group called “teenage boys” from a far-off land, but judging from the store’s wares and the new clothing of the princesses, it was plain: he was richer than Diorelle. Probably richer than the Merchant Kingdom and the Theocracy as well.

He drew from a deep well of cultural knowledge. I knew he was no ordinary boy, but how extraordinary, I did not yet know. The wind was shifting. Something great and wild lay just beyond the horizon, and I could not yet comprehend its shape.

DAY 65

NOON

The physical labor is eternal shipping-mechanism heavy labor, so I got glared at.

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

I REJECTED PRINCESS GIRL'S request at Merimeri-san's insistence. The Second Division old dude was apparently going to give us his regiments. I wasn't a big fan of his, but the only condition he gave us was to not harm the civilians, so we took the deal.

The old dude was in high spirits as a result. The opportunistic nobles and the second prince would join us next. And now, the Merchant Kingdom would make their move—we had them on a leash.

"There we go! Supply route complete!"

"Yay, we did it!"

Running a souvenir shop was serious business. Right now I was sweating my butt off setting it up in the castle. We just got a fresh shipment of oil and sake, which just so happened to be the exact same amount I'd sold a few hours ago. Those were popular products, so I thought I'd better grab 'em, bring 'em back and sell 'em!

"Miss Armor Rep, can you pack up all the barrels? I'll handle the grain stock. We're just about running out of grain as well. But we should get a fresh shipment by the time we run out. Work's pretty busy, innit? Grindset mindset, yes ma'am!"

Huh? Her only response was to glare at me? I suppose because she was working her ass off, doing the heavy lifting for a shipping enterprise. We had so much work to do; this was already the third time today we were restocking.

But no matter how much we restocked, it all got bought straight away. We had to keep grinding. Just plain, ordinary work. Everything we brought back got sold out, which meant we were always stocking. It was an ouroboros of a shipping-mechanism heavy labor job, for sure.

I took the secret route to restock the products. My Map skill also displayed secret passages, so I could use all sorts of handy paths. But even when you knew where a secret passage was, the entrance itself was often well hidden. *That's when Area Analyze comes in handy.*

I heard voices echoing in the passageway. Sounded like the barrel shipment was the talk of the town. Since I'd promised not to harm the civilians, the second prince was getting bossy with the soldiers under his command.

The second prince and his backers finally had their dream: a dream they'd held since before they could remember, one that had been out of reach until now. I peeked in on that whole sitch (I was really just passing by on a restocking run), but there were no surprises there. Now that the Second Division was backing us up, the atmosphere felt more stable than before. All of the second prince's nobles and servants, as well as the Merchant Kingdom representatives, were very happily duped. And I was happy they were happy. *What a cozy vibe. It just warms my soul!*

Products arrived from the Merchant Kingdom via ship. Then, huge shipments of products were carried off the merchant fleet into the kingdom. The Diorelle conflict fell into a stalemate—the Theocracy couldn't stop bleeding support. The Merchant Kingdom reaped a great economic windfall, but that was merely a symptom of its customers' prosperity. Diorelle was living that lost and happy dream. The Second Division's long-held hope had blossomed. At long last, the people would not suffer harm.

That was their long-held desire: the strength to withstand invasion, even without reinforcements from the Merchant Kingdom. And now, it was a reality.

"That's why people just can't give up on dreaming. It really hooks you, you know? Dreams that don't come true really suck, though. They're kind of a curse, you know? Like the contents of Pandora's box. A real drag."

We'd set the bait, and they'd taken it. The Merchant Kingdom saw the demand and sent shipments…right where we could scoop them out of the water. You following? You get me?

"Pirates! Pirates have been spotted, they've attacked the merchant's shipments!"

"They say it was an incredibly fast ship of steel!"

Yup, things had gotten started. *The Meatheads of the Caribbean!* Ugh. What a dorky title! Just thinking it made me wish they would get dragged to the bottom of the ocean, but with Slimey there, nothing bad could happen to them.

"Send out an emergency order! Prioritize foodstuffs above all else. If we run out of grain, the capital will fall!"

"Request naval vessels to eliminate the pirates. Should we give them free reign, the damage will spiral out of control!"

Yup, they had no choice but to order more goods. And, of course, we'd be more than happy to help in a crisis!

The Merchant Kingdom couldn't even imagine a hybrid steam-engine- and spellstone-powered ironclad vessel, much less win against one in battle. They couldn't make a ship like that even if they could conceive of it. The level of expertise required was off the charts. And *someone*, not naming names, made a ballista when they decided to make a ship. A high-spec siege engine that could launch projectiles over five kilometers, right on the deck of that ironclad. *I'll hammer those nerds one day!*

"No foe can stand up to my Big Money design! Endless supply and infinite demand! Big Money all day every day!"

It was useful to have a handle on which products sold best, and the meatheads definitely had a handle on plundering. If we kept this up long enough, it would ruin the entire Merchant Kingdom. We could retake the capital. Once we did, the Merchant Kingdom would have no way to make more money from it. If they persisted…well, they'd have no choice but to try and buy back their products from the souvenir store to meet their orders. Gotta keep your contracts, you know. Now *that's* how to get bestsellers!

"Our stores are empty yet again!"

“We are conducting a search as we speak.”

“They must’ve infiltrated from the outside—search the castle!”

“Can we not levy a tax?”

“Impossible, the citizens couldn’t bear it!”

“But at some point our provisions to the populace will have to cease.”

“It matters not. The royal division risked their lives for this. Keep the provisions afloat!”

It was chaos, and in the midst of chaos lay big profits. I guess the all-encompassing order not to harm the people put all the other players in a bind. Now the Merchant Kingdom had to stick around until the end. They had to keep sending; the kingdom had to keep buying.

The merchants needed to keep up the flow of goods, otherwise their investment was for nothing. It was good money after bad. The longer they kept this up, the more and more they would lose.

“And *I* will keep making plentiful profits on pilfering! Thanks dudes!”

For some reason, no one had bothered to block off these secret passages inside the castle. Shouldn’t they be concerned about them? Anyone could come and go as they pleased by finding the entrance with Area Analyze. Combined with Map, I got a 3D-rendered virtual tour of the castle. The entrances were decrepit, though, and the passages had fallen into disrepair, so I supposed everyone else had forgotten about them?

“Welp, while I’m at it I may as well make a map and sell it to Princess Girl for some hella stacks!”

All of the Merchant Kingdom dudes were panicking ’cause they knew they had to resupply the kingdom. They had only two options—withdraw, which would stop the bleeding and break their hold on Diorelle, or keep at it, which wouldn’t. *Send all the goods you want. It doesn’t matter, I’ll take them all!*

“Ugh, the next shipment’s late. Can’t you merchants speed up your merchandise delivery? How about shipping directly to the souvenir shop?”

This wouldn't stop until the Merchant Kingdom went bankrupt, which they inevitably would. Too late to stop it! Still, merchants were cunning. They probably had insurance. They'd have some way to make a profit on the situation regardless of how it panned out, and if things went smoothly, they'd win on both fronts. Those merchants were incredibly talented at making money, and that was all well and good, but this went beyond that. This was politics. *But you can't just buy political power, you know? It's not, like, a product you can pick off a shelf.*

A merchant with a newly empty shelf was a merchant who was counting his money. That's just math. My leg up, the way I could win, was by being the *only* guy with *anything* remaining on the shelf. If I sucked up every last thing that could possibly go for sale, I'd squeeze out their money. Their power would follow right after.

Wither and die, why don't you? You thingless merchants. Of course merchants without wares would go extinct! 'Cause that meant they weren't even merchants anymore, they were just beggars. Powerless beggars. You gotta keep up that *grind* life, guys.

Still, I knew for a fact they would have insurance. They had two, no, three ways to profit. Three surefire strategies to replenish their coffers. They should have had those in place before I even got here! If they were prepared, the merchants could still make a profit and win.

I didn't *need* a categorical win though. *Win* and *lose* were too binary. Any drain on their balance sheet brought me closer to my goal. Any losses would chip away at their profit margin. It would shave away their power until they took their greedy little hands out of the kingdom's pocket and went to find a better investment. *My profits!*

They must have had some insurance prepared to ensure they could make a profit out of this no matter what. Some back-up plan to guarantee profits by another mechanism, every T crossed and I dotted so that plan would pay out, all the risk carefully distributed. With the kingdom and Theocracy locked into place…they could do whatever they wanted with the nation of beastfolk.

That's why I gutted their shipping supply chain.

"Ravage their vessels with pirates, plunder their goods…if that's not enough to force them to give up on the capital, they'll start attacking the

Beast Kingdom next. Probably to go slave hunting?"

That mission to disrupt the merchants' back-up plan was underway, or soon would be. The pirates were getting a fresh start as brigands. 'Cause the pirates took orders from the nerds, and as we all know, nerds love a girl with little animal ears. Duh. They were on the way to the forest, doing some pirating on the way, but the Beast Kingdom was their primary objective. 'Cause girls with animal ears. You see?

"Target: Beastfolk slaves. Kill anyone attacking beastfolk villages to take new slaves. Hunt the beastfolk slave hunters. Yup, they'll crush 'em. The nerds love those beast ears, but old merchants and mercenaries aren't loved by anybody, right?"

Nod nod.

My handy-dandy pirate smugglers were blossoming into slave hunter-hunters. How useful! As for the meatheads…if I released them into the mountains by themselves, they'd turn to plain old beasts.

I told the nerds, "There are some slave hunters from the Merchant Kingdom hunting beast slaves, so do you wanna go slave-hunter hunting? It's gonna involve brutal hand-to-hand combat. I'm sending Slimey so it'll be fine either way, but Slimey might not be able to save everyone in time, so I'm telling you about it. 'Cause you'd get pissed if I didn't tell you about it? Right?"

And their immediate response was, "Thank you for letting us know. Of course we'll go. Otherwise, what was the point of getting so strong?"

That's what they said, and off they went. With Slimey and the meatheads, too. Those barbarians had insane combat capabilities. But the slave hunters were anything but weak. They probably outclassed the kingdom's soldiers. Didn't put off the nerd brigade one bit, though.

"Yup, and they already went and everything. They were pretty pissed off…they don't often get angry, but yeah, they were angry when I told them."

I had rarely seen the nerds look so serious. They had gone through enough pain and suffering to take the suffering of others pretty seriously. They knew loss, and defeat, and sadness, and pain. They spent their lives longing to go to a fantasy world. Then they actually went and gained true

fantasy powers. The power to become heroes. They spent their whole lives preparing to be here. For the nerds, everything had led up to this mission.

"Wow, they're super into those beast ears! Yeah, they were seriously riled up!"

They might have to take lives, and yet, they went. They didn't let it weigh on them, they didn't hesitate—they just couldn't stand by and do nothing. So they went.

"You can't hold back," I told them. "You've got the meatheads, but you've gotta give this your all, promise? I mean, that was the point of coming to this world, right? So get serious! Ya feel?"

"We know," they said. That was it. Meanwhile, the meatheads weren't even listening to me!

"They never try anything too risky by themselves, but in a group they kinda go all out…they're anything but defensive specialists, for real."

Nod nod.

The opposite was true. Think about it—the nerdy kids got bullied their whole lives. There was no way they weren't angry. Or didn't cry. Or didn't suffer. Or didn't resent the bullies, or didn't judge them, or didn't hate them. There was no way they resigned themselves to all that bullying! And now they were here, in their long-dreamed-of fantasy world, with power surpassing even their wildest payback fantasies.

This adventure was what they'd wanted all their lives, and the reality of it was…well. 'Course they were pissed…their hearts were scarred with pain that drove them to near madness.

"I guess they're gonna let out their anger at last, eh? Gotta let it out eventually, right?"

Nod nod.

"When you keep something bottled up inside it eventually builds up and shoots out, ya know? They need to let out their anger somehow. They've kept it in their whole lives up until now. That's too much patience, bearing too much. If you bottle it up like that, you'll forget how to get just plain old casual mad."

Yup. The only thing left that could stir up a real and righteous anger for a nerd: cute beast ears.

"They're probably a bit scared of letting it out at this point. So they gotta. Or they'll eventually burst, right?"

Nod nod!

Still, I sent the meatheads with them just in case, to let them loose and run wild in the forest. Ideally, no one would see them—or pay attention, at least. They were predictable, so I didn't need to worry about them.

I'd sent another trump card on his way with 'em. Beastfolk tribes were strong—they say that there's nothing out there stronger than one of the beastfolk protecting their loved ones. The slave hunters subduing such power needed to be stronger, needed to have traps, needed to have powerful weapons.

"There's no way they can win against Slimey, though. That's just, uh, how do you put it? Impossible? 'Cause like, Slimey? Duh."

Nod nod.

Even the Dungeon Emperor recognized Slimey's strength. I didn't need to worry about the Beast Kingdom. That was perfectly under control. I could focus on ripping off the Merchant Kingdom. I had to make them give up to make them lose money. Until then, keep on ripping them off. Thievery was the best attack you could muster against a kingdom of money-worshippers.

"To be a merchant you gotta have merchandise. If you're a false merchant who controls people and countries but you don't actually sell jack, then of course you'll go extinct sooner or later."

They were trying to profit off of wheelin' and dealin' alone! That's not what real merchants do! They needed to actually *sell* something! If all that wheeling-and-dealing income vanished, then they'd have nothing left. What do you call a merchant who can't make or ship anything? A nobody!

But these doofuses couldn't see the connection between war and commerce. They couldn't conceive that someone might do to them what they were doing to others. They knew war controlled the economy; they

controlled shipping with their navy, but somehow the two concepts never met in their little minds.

Sorry to inform you, merchants, but this is war. An economic war.

DAY 65

NIGHT

This is a seriously tainted love triangle.

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

GIRLS' MEETING

THE "I ❤ FRONTIER" SERIES sold like crazy—nobody could get enough of it. I guess the capital really loves the frontier?

"The people here love the frontier, but they're in a long-distance relationship at the moment and cheating on Omui with the Merchant Kingdom! Meanwhile the Theocracy is trying to force the frontier into a relationship! This is a seriously tainted love triangle!"

That was a super problematic way to look at a seriously problematic dynamic!

"Good work and stuff?" Haruka-kun said. "We did epic ripping off, major bill stacking, and the first day of business was a smashing success! Ya know? Look forward to your first salary. I'll even be providing a bonus of brand-new bags I developed! Item bags, ya feel? So there will be three pieces of payment per person, but also a first-come first serve battle royale! So who wants cash, and who wants manju and sweets? Now fight. To the death!"

"Gimmeeeeeeeee!"

Chaos, cacophony, cash. We were all dead tired after the first day of business, but now it was time to hand out the salaries—as in, host a maiden bargain sale (battle).

"Bag! I *need* that bag! I'll do anything!"

"Trade that with me! I want the yellow ones, the yellow corduroy shoes!"

“Um, but those are, like, mine? For realsies?”

Jiggle jiggle.

“You can’t separate me from my destined bag! We’re fated to be together!”

Uh, those are all prismatic items, you know? Although…I wanted yellow, too! But the shape was important! Ugh, we could only choose three! A purse, or a backpack, or a messenger bag… Should I go with a tote or a crossbody style? We were having the bargain sale (battle) before the bath, so we still had our equipment on. Dangerous! *I’m gonna have to go with… backpack!*

“Don’t pull! I touched it first!”

“*I* was holding it first!”

“Where’s the checkout? Where’s Haruka-kun? Is he on the register?”

The storm settled down, leaving all of us keeled over, gripping our three favorite bags in hand. We were tired before, but now we were dead tired. Every single girl had a satisfied grin on her face. Everyone held their new bags tight.

Those item bags were supposed to be incredibly difficult to make. Haruka-kun’s item bag could hold ten times more items without an issue, but with each new line he put out, the bags had even greater item capacity and tons of additional effects. They were impossible to mass-produce, which meant that he made them every night before he went to bed, slowly building up enough to sell to us. Of course we were pleased. These bags were our prized possessions.

“You guys can get in the bath first,” Haruka-kun said. “I’ll make dinner in the meantime. Today I’m doing a pirate-day buffet celebration: omelet soba, jumbo gyoza, rice balls, fried dishes, salad, and meat and veggie skewers. First come, first serve…once you’re out of the bath!”

“Buffet! But since when was today Pirate Day?”

Haruka-kun explained that Oda-kun and the others had become pirates. Why had *our* side turned into a crew of pirates and thieves? To hear Haruka-kun tell it, you’d assume we were the villains.

I was incredibly tired, but it was a fulfilling day. All the girls were overcome with joy at finally getting item bags. I doubted anyone remembered that we were in the middle of a war. Wartime anxiety had turned into a souvenir shop success story, far different from the war we had been expecting…wait a second.

"If we meet our sales goals every day…" I trailed off. "Do we get a bonus *every day*?!"

"Maybe!"

"There's no time for war with bonuses on the table!"

"Time to sell up and sell off!"

Even Merielle-san, Princess Girl, and Maid Girl were fawning over the bags. These were priceless treasures that weren't available anywhere else, beyond any other equipment in the entire world. Each item bag was worth more than a national-treasure-class item. They must've been incredibly happy to get items like that as if it were nothing. I saw tears in their eyes. They'd also been equipped with gear on par with ours—top-class armor. Incredibly revealing, but still. They were very much a part of the team.

But their fantasy-world lives hadn't prepared them for bargain sales. They were ragged, nearly falling out of their clothes.

"All right, bath time!" I said.

"Let's gooooo!"

We rushed into the bathroom, rinsed off, and surged into the bath. Now, with noble ladies around, it was time to show off our most genteel bath manners, and—uh, who was that doing a cannon ball? The *princess*?

"Yahoo!"

"It's a big bath, but not as nice as the one at the inn or Murimuri Castle."

"I guess we're not planning to do business here for too long?"

"Yeah, he actually didn't go all out for once."

It was a sturdy, robust, and elaborately decorated bath…but not as all-out wild as his other creations.

“As a matter of fact, this is the most splendid bath in the entire kingdom,” said Princess Shalliceres.

“Yes, the baths in the castle are smaller and shoddier,” agreed Ceres.

“They’re still poisoned by common sense!”

You couldn’t think normally when Haruka-kun was around. Not with that creative labor he called a side gig. When you were dealing with a mind that could implode civilizations, common sense was a poison you had to shake off. The frontier had skipped straight from the Middle Ages into the modern era—absolutely absurd! There were still no complex machines. This was a mage-based civilization, after all, so industrialization was based on magic. In some key ways, Omui was even ahead of our old, modern world.

Yep, that was the uncanny part of being here. Haruka-kun was starting industrial revolutions wherever he went. He retrieved everything we’d lost when we came here, relentlessly and mercilessly snatching it back on to the table for us, plus a little interest. None of us lived in luxury back in Japan. We were just normal kids. Here, we lived better than royalty.

“The idea of war was scary at first…but nothing has really changed, has it?”

“Right?”

This was a shadow war. It was a war to take back for the frontier everything that’d been stolen from it. This time the target was the Merchant Kingdom, and Haruka-kun surely intended to bleed them dry. We’d steal the kingdom back. Fighting could lead to deaths, stealing could lead to retribution, minor hostility might escalate into mass bloodshed. But this shop was established to rip off the merchants to death. It was plain as day. A shop like this was a merchant’s worst enemy.

“I want to get to the buffet right away, but the bath feels so good!”

“Ugh, right?”

The timing was essential here—if we left all at once, the stage would be set for a buffet battle, and unfortunately the princesses had no prayer of keeping up. They needed more growth before they were ready to go toe-to-toe with us war maidens. This was every day for us.

Hm. Maybe we were the ones who were poisoned?

“The options were to either kill the second prince or capture him, huh… And then Haruka-kun chose a souvenir shop instead.”

“He was after the Merchant Kingdom, as it is manipulating the prince behind the scenes,” Book Club President explained. “It’s economic warfare.”

“Letting them know that if they mess with Diorelle, they’re dead meat. I get it.”

The Merchant Kingdom should’ve stayed focused on economics, not the military and politics. In a twisted irony, economics were their weakness, and Haruka-kun was attacking them right where it hurt. The Merchant Kingdom was making money *from* the military and political angles—it didn’t actually produce anything—so their economy was lagging behind. If you took all the cash away from a country that made money without actually making any products, their military and government were bound to collapse in no time. The Merchant Kingdom was a glorified warehouse, soon to be empty.

“You’ve explained it three times but I still don’t get it.”

“This is what Haruka-kun said to me: ‘A monetary economy within a trust-based economy is frail and vulnerable. It offers additional convenience, but it’s risky. Think about it. Money is a token of trust. If people don’t believe coins will buy anything, then they become worthless. The government and the military provide the trust that backs the money, and with all those things assembled, you’re in business. But you can’t go back once you’ve started relying on coins, so the Merchant Kingdom can’t fight as merchants. ’Cause they don’t make things, they don’t ship things, they don’t sell things—they just invest and profit. There are no makers, shippers, or sellers. If their monetary system collapses, there’s nothing left.’”

“…I got bored.”

“So they’re going to lose trust in money?”

“I guess?”

“Are real merchants going to take back the Merchant Kingdom?”

“That depends on what happens internally,” said Book Club President.

“Their government will lose their source of power.”

“Apparently, the few remaining genuine merchants have been dissatisfied with the government for some time.”

They made money by coercing other nations with politics and the military. They didn’t have any true economic might, which the actual merchants resented. The only thing they had was money. Well, Haruka-kun’s plan depleted that, and with enough losses, the merchants’ association would crumble pretty darn quick.

“They work together because they make money together, so if they lose money, it’ll collapse?”

“I see. We have to make them suffer losses until they’re cornered.”

“So the plan is just to keep stealing?!”

Even I could see the merchants were doomed. Even if they tried to profit off of politics and the military, those could be crushed by economics. They didn’t have a real economy of their own. That’s why Haruka-kun went after it.

“Mistress Class Rep-sama, please allow me to wash your back.”

It was Shalliceres—huh?!

“Your skin is so beautiful, so lovely, smooth, and enchanting, not a single wrinkle!”

“Th-th-thank you very much—L-Lady Shalliceres, you’re tickling me—oh, that f-feels so nice!”

“It just got yuri-diculously yuri in here!”

After we soaked in the bath, we washed up. This next-level bubbly body soap must have been infused with the frontier’s famous mushrooms. Just a few seconds on my skin made it so much more radiant! I couldn’t wait for the bubbly body lotion line to come out next!

Princess Girl must’ve really liked washing my back. She was always lively in the bath. She acted like she’d never gotten the chance to wash anybody or be washed before. But still…there was something about the

way she rubbed my back…something off, I mean. She was very good, and it felt nice? *I'm just not used to it…* But why was she using her hands? Wouldn't a scrubber be more, uh, appropriate?

"I hope Oda-kun and his friends are gonna be okay."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure the only people who have to worry are their enemies?"

"But still, maybe some of us should've gone with them?"

"I dunno, we barely could keep up with the sales as it is. Given how today was, I bet tomorrow'll be even more crowded?"

"It's an economic miracle."

The Merchant Kingdom's objective was to seize the capital and head off the Theocracy so they could get a cut of the profit off the stolen spellstones. They were squabbling over the kingdom, the source of the spellstones. Now, a second front had opened up, and this was a bloodier battle. Both of them had attacked the Beast Kingdom. Diorelle, which would otherwise protect the beastfolk, was stuck in place, and the Theocracy and Merchant Kingdom had moved in. The timing was perfect.

We could crush both of them.

Apparently, Haruka-kun vowed to win in three days. He could make the Merchant Kingdom die of a slow bleed, or rout them quickly and comprehensively. Doing it for longer sounded safer in theory, but it was impractical. It was time to set prices in the souvenir shop to take some deep, short-term losses. Undercut the Merchant Kingdom so steeply they couldn't compete. Then, once the Merchant Kingdom withdrew, we could rush in with support. We'd recapture the royal capital this way.

After that, Haruka-kun's plan was to rush back to the frontier on his own for whatever next step he had in mind. I didn't know how yet, but Haruka-kun had a plan for protecting the frontier all by himself.

As for us? We couldn't decide who would get a bra tonight. Haruka-kun was still making those bras. War really hadn't changed anything!

DAY 65

NIGHT

We can't cause friction with our invasion strategy, because chafing hurts?

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

I HAD NEVER SEEN Gymnastics Girl and Shield Girl together before. Oof, sorry! *He had to remember their names by now, right?* Nope!

"I'm not used to seeing you two together, Mamma Mia Pudding and Shield Rep. I guess you're a disciple of Shield Rep, huh? With your pudding powers and all? You have my full support. We could definitely use some more pudding in this world. I'll try to make some for you if I can. Do you want some equipment with a Pudding skill attached? Sounds kinda sticky, but I can do it if you dig it?"

"My nickname was *Mermaid Princess*, not Mamma Mia Pudding! Why can't you remember my real name or *my* nickname? It's Mermaid Princess, goddamn it!"

"Haruka-san, thank you in advance. I will use this bra to protect everyone with my life! I'll never give up!"

Uh…wow, they couldn't have been in more different moods. Don't shield people with a bra, though! If you use that bra as a shield, it won't lift, separate, *or* protect you from blows! On the other hand, if we ended up fighting high school boys, fighting with a bra in hand would be an instant knock-out. They'd die with smiles on their faces.

Anyway: underwear! It protects your *shape*. Supposedly, it protects your breasts from droopage. Speaking of which, I even got requests for push-up bras. Like they thought I was a professional underwear couturier or something.

"I think I could just endow it with an Anti-Gravity effect to make a push-up bra? That sounds pretty nuts, freeing the boobs from gravity. That would make all sorts of other parts rise with them. What's the ceiling on this?"

I mean, what did teenage boys know about protecting a girl's figure? I didn't have breasts! This wasn't a body-swap isekai, so I *shouldn't* know!

Miss Armor Rep covered my eyes. How did the actual blindfold conveniently disappear every time? And Miss Armor Rep…who taught her to stick out her tongue and wink like that? That expression *definitely* didn't exist in this world! Just how were they corrupting her in those girl meetings? What did they talk about? Besides how they needed push-up bras?

"I mean, I'd like to popularize beach volleyball, tennis, and whatnot here, but I dunno about rhythmic gymnastics… Even if people wanted to, putting together a competition seems outta the question? And even if people here started learning rhythmic gymnastics, they'd have no chance of catching up with you… Although, since this is a fantasy world, maybe Hanuman would stand a chance! The goblins and kobolds and orcs can roll around to the beat, maybe… I haven't even seen a Hanuman yet. But goblins doing gymnastics sounds bad for more than one reason. Who wants to see a goblin in a leotard?"

"Since when is Hanuman a gymnast?" snapped Gymnastics Girl. "Are we starting a competition? No goblins, okay! And if I have to fight monsters, then why gymnastics? I'll just fight them normally!"

Wow, seemed like anti-Hanuman discrimination. Okay. And I didn't get the sense that golems would be any better. Rocks doing rhythmic gymnastics…didn't exactly sound like an attraction, did it?

"I don't even know if I want to do it anymore," Gymnastics Girl said. "I mean, it's a weird feeling, something that you were forced to do all your life suddenly disappearing. But I dunno if I *want* to, right? I'm honestly… just relieved I don't have to practice anymore."

All of those burdens to compete had just vanished. Still, something you spent so much of your life polishing and cultivating had to feel significant to you. She was an absolute star of rhythmic gymnastics. No wonder she had mixed feelings about it—her life was nothing but a series of competitions. But she had no one to compete against anymore. She wouldn't even deign to fight Hanuman.

"Okay, new plan: we catch some young mermaids. We raise them specifically to jump through flaming hoops. Bam, we'll have Mermaid Princesses…"

"No, *I'm* the Mermaid Princess! Why am I Mamma Mia Pudding all of a sudden?! Am I pudding at a Greek wedding? I don't get it. You make *no* sense!"

It was worse than I thought. We'd come to a grim, harsh world. There was no ABBA here. Didn't she want a Pudding skill? What about a really big one? Speaking of which, the size and jiggling motion of, uh, something else was causing me a few problems.

That's why Shield Rep and Gymnastics Girl were such an unusual combination. One of them charged head-on from the front lines, guarding everyone from enemy attacks with her shield: Shield Rep. And then there was the shifting and transforming, spinning and swooping, leaping and diving Gymnastics Girl. Designing both at once was breaking my brain!

"Hmmm?"

A bra for charging at the enemy head-on had never before been developed. I doubted that bras with crumple zones for maximum automobile safety had been developed…anywhere? And then, a bra for shifting and transforming, spinning and swooping, leaping and diving—the

tech simply hadn't been discovered. I needed some sort of never-before-seen gravity magic, a centrifugal force and vibration suppression technique.

In conclusion, I wasn't sure I could modify my existing designs to achieve the needed results. The only thing I could do was make a model, test it out with motion, and then recalculate…the problem there was, how might evaluating breast movements in high-spec 3D visual simulation stimulate my fragile teenage boy heart and soul?! *The hands covering my eyes, they do nothing! It's because of all the gaps! Close them up, damn it!*

"Okay, I'll start with just a normal one for each of you. After that, we'll test them out with combat in mind. First, I'll finish the measurements and put together a prototype. Bras to surpass the limit of physics! Why am I using bras to surpass the limits of physics again? What's the point of a physics-breaking brassiere anyway? As a teenage boy, I'll save my puzzling over such matters for a later time and date (tonight)."

I didn't think it was possible. We were pushing the category of *bra* past the breaking point. How come it fell to an innocent teenage boy to break the laws of physics? Whatever the result would be, it was gonna be some never-before-seen equipment. It needed to perfectly enwrap the breasts for all multi-directional movements. I needed to build in a mechanism to absorb crash and shock force, as well as a system to maintain breast shape when getting blown around. What was this bra becoming?

"Uuugh…"

"Mmmf…"

I'm not listening. I'm not listening! I couldn't listen because the moment I reacted to the sound, Miss Armor Rep's fingers split open! She was using her mighty Dungeon Emperor powers to read my slightest reaction!

"Can you please stop opening your fingers?! You're doing it in rhythm, too! You planned to uncover my eyes from the start, didn't you?!"

"Urk…"

"Eep!"

I sketched out the calculus for various patterns as well as the different results those patterns would produce. If I didn't have any special conditions

in the calculation, I should be able to use my data to adapt to any unforeseen eventualities. To put it simply, the bras would not pose a problem. As for the bottoms…those took time for various reasons. Like… falling over, and collapsing, and breaking out in convulsions. The agonized cries of sin!

I made the adjustments to the temporary mold, so now I just had to test the models out and make adjustments. We needed to subject it to some motion or I wouldn't get the data I needed. Okay, normal motion—all looking good so far. But normal motion wasn't going to happen for these girls in battle. It was time to give these bras a real test.

"Okay, can you try moving around? If I make the shorts too, there's a chance I made a tiny oopsy and you might not be able to move at all. So let's just stick to the bras for now."

These bras were as good as any of the ones I made the other girls. In fact, at the cost of some aesthetics, I used more cloth to firmly, wholly wrap up the breasts and enable adaptive responses to movement in any direction. It was experiment time. These were still temporary designs—I needed to know which of these girls' movements they could respond to and which they couldn't. These bras had to be fit for combat.

"Ooh, it's so comfy!"

"This is a trial product?"

They put their equipment over the bras and started to test out various movements. So now Miss Armor Rep covered my eyes properly? Well, they only put their usual equipment on their bottom halves, so I could still see everything. Oh, and Magic Hands and Holding were working hard at their calculations, so even though my eyes were covered, Supreme Thinking could still accurately estimate every little curve and jiggle.

"Huff, huff!"

"Hrrn! Hah!"

Shield Rep practiced side-stepping and sudden stops and starts, and I could tell that her chest was out of control when she did. *My god, what is going on in there?!* The contents were bursting and rubbing and jumping!

“Looks like I need to make an interior air cushion. Air pressure should help reduce the impact.”

A device that moved air pressure through a tube to manipulate the shape. The remaining problem was how to reduce chafing. Time for another iteration! Meanwhile, the bra kept Gymnastics Girl’s breasts inside despite the flips and rolls…barely. The edges were slipping outside when she jumped and did cartwheels. *Her cups really do runneth over.*

“Looks like the only option is to make it into a bandage top to reduce forces from all directions.”

The planning was easy, but nothing could’ve been harder than making the adjustments and revisions. I had no prior model to work off of, so I needed to do some groping. *Not with my actual hands, of course. That’d be a crime!*

I had to use Magic Hands, groping every inch of those objects until I could figure out the answer. Normally, imprisonment wouldn’t be enough for a guy who gropes every inch of a teen girl’s boobs, right? My poor sex appeal was suffering! It was the only thing here that *wasn’t* jumping and bouncing!

“That doesn’t hurt. The pressure isn’t too much, and sudden stops don’t feel like they stretch it or anything. There’s no chafing now. This is wonderful, Haruka-san! Now I’m sure I can protect everyone. I swear I will!”

It was going to be a little bit rougher to get Shield Rep’s bra right, but I installed front and back air cushions into it. They pushed up her breasts considerably, making them look a lot bigger. But this bra wasn’t designed to trick teenage boys, no. Doubt me not, my teenage brethren. This bra was for battle! She’d said how much her chest hurt after battle, and this would give her some relief.

“But don’t protect us with the bra, okay? Actually, with those air cushions, you just might be able to. Just don’t whip it out in the middle of a fight!”

I’d worked hard on that bra, ya know?

“This is the best bra I’ve ever had,” gushed Gymnastics Girl. “Although, I’m not sure if you can even call it a bra! It fits so perfectly. It’s

so comfortable, it's like a second skin. Why is the matching bottom a sexy leotard, though?! I'd get rushed off the floor if I wore this in competition. It is really supportive, mind you…and I guess it's underwear, so…"

A leotard-style foundation garment. Even a bandage-top style design couldn't sufficiently constrain them! Now her movements were free-flowing and unrestrained, whether she was using her upper or lower half. I took the bandage-top design and secured it with an X-shaped belt, which presented enough diagonal repressive force to keep everything in check. They still could move freely vertically like that, so I needed to add a vertical line…the result being a sexy strap leotard? Design complete?

"*This* should restrain from every angle while maintaining some stretch. It's got the tensile and elastic force to contain without too much chafing, and it can handle tension and stretching from all 360-degrees thanks to the strap design. It's *kinda* a leotard? The design makes sense. It's kinda sexy, though."

Well, in a sense, it was nothing but straps. Sort of like a roll of duct tape across her chest and a few strings and that was it. Maybe closer to bondage lingerie than anything—so, super-hot! I had never imagined a design like this before. I had to make one for Miss Armor Rep too! Only wonderful things could come of wrapping up her wonderful body in all these sexy straps!

Combat-specialized limited-edition underwear. If Class Rep found out about this, it'd be lecture time for me. I'd just followed the results of all my 3D calculations, though. But who would believe me? Even I didn't believe my own claims of innocence!

"My objective was to provide maximum flexibility for movements while still firmly restraining the breasts, and the best solution was to use tape to create restraining force…and the result was too sexy."

"I understand how you came up with the design, you don't have to keep calling it sexy! Please?"

"But it's *sooo* sexy!"

With the combat-specialized bras finished, it was time to wrap up this little project. Once the shorts were finished, that was it, done—everyone finished. Me included! For various teenage boy reasons! Not a single

teenage boy in this world could survive the simulated stimulations of Magic Hands. No, it was positively too much for teenage boys…and teenage girls too, apparently.

We'd died. Shield Rep perished with her fists gripped with determination, sighing as she collapsed and fainted.

"Mamma Mia Pudding…! Why'd she pass out with her legs spread out so wide?"

On the one hand, the style of garment made it easier to fit the bottoms on her in that position, but her pose had various other problems…for one thing, it was difficult to move her fainted body. (*Twitch, twitch.*)

DAY 66

MORNING

It was a perfect, complete, and wonderfully pleasant environment and action to me, indeed.

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

MORNING—time to get going. They say early worms get away from the birds. I think? Our class had a firmly established, shared objective. We'd formulate a united front at our morning meeting.

"Yeah, so, like, invite in the customers and rip off the living shit outta them? Sweet? Success, win, business, deals, but mainly keep ripping them off? A lot?"

The morning briefing, after a night locking in friction-filled combat, a firmly plump figure and shared connubial bliss. A fine morning, indeed!

"I mean, last night was so firm, it was ridiculous. My Magic Hands just kept firming and firming and she just kept this-ing and that-ing. I mean —never mind!"

A swinging morning star morning, indeed!

"Its name has 'morning' in it, but it brings eternal sleep so it's really more about night? Can we please ban morning star attacks inside the souvenir shop? As the manager, I'm making it a new rule!"

I had no other choice. My life was at risk. Time to hang up a sign on the wall.

"Don't tell me that was our morning meeting, and those were our marching orders?"

"I think he intended to make them orders! He's really undermining his authority!"

“Well, even his orders were phrased like questions, so he sort of grammatically undermined himself.”

“Don’t tell me that’s everything? Please don’t?”

What’s with all the criticism? I expressed the main points in a concise manner, and all they did in response was nag, nag, nag. *Teenage girls are so difficult nowadays!*

Business was about to begin. By this point, the nerds and meatheads had probably completed their reclass from pirates to mountain brigands. We had tons of smuggled products from the Merchant Kingdom coming in. Yes, I would redistribute (sell) these ill-gotten goods to the capital populace! I could keep the pure rip-offery to the nobles. That’s why I made the fancy meeting room, now with 10× the entrance fee for 10× the hospitality!

“I’ve gotta kick out the soldiers today, too, so it’s a busy one. Kick ’em until my kicker’s tired! I mean, think about all of the beautiful women stranded in orphanages in the city. I’ve kinda been waiting to start an orphanage for beautiful teenage girls. Well, I’ve been waiting for them to come ask me to do it, but no one ever does, so…I just gotta step up!”

And then I’d kick any old dudes in my way into a swamp and burn ’em. Kicking can turn into frying up in the blink of an eye, ya know?

“The orphanage run by the old dudes only takes in orphaned old dudes. Time to torch the joint!”

“They don’t keep old men in orphanages, so don’t burn *any* of them!” the girls cried.

“And the old man in charge is still running an orphanage, so he’s not a bad guy to begin with!”

Here’s the situation: envision a champagne tower. In order for the people at the bottom to get any, they have to wait for it to overflow from the top. It takes a long, long time for the champagne to reach them. They might die before it does. The ones at risk were at the bottom, not the top.

“Besides, the people at top have bigger glasses, right? The smaller glasses at the bottom don’t even get a drop. Since the bottom glasses don’t have the same endless gluttony as the ones on top, you need to reverse the

champagne tower with a sucking straw and distribute it bottom to up, ya know? Rip off the top, sprinkle down to the bottom—now that's real economic policy!"

"Is this Haruka-kun's economic theory of rip-offs?!"

"This theory has more legal problems that economic ones, that's for sure!"

It was true that direct payments had a lot of problems. But they were guaranteed. If people didn't have the bare necessities to survive, you couldn't rip them off. Fair enough!

"I mean, if people weren't so poor, then we could rip off *everyone*, right? That's a win-win for everybody. We gotta steal stuff to give the other people the other stuff. Turn it from a rigged game for the poor into a happy situation for everybody!"

"A legal atrocity versus an unlawful justice, is it?"

"This is good, guys!" I protested. "If you aggregate wealth in a country, you need to distribute it fairly. If you don't, then how else will you get rich by ripping off other rich folks? Ripping and enriching for everybody! It's the perfect plan!"

At this rate, the beautiful orphanage ladies would come flocking to me in no time! I could see it perfectly in my mind. And those sexy orphanage ladies…would need to be nourished! Some old tantric master always said that health is wealth. *Must supply nutrition!*

"Here is the official permission slip for your entry into the capital from Captain Terisel of the Second Royal Division. Please check the details."

It felt like people were doing everything they could to avoid actual negotiations with me. Everything was going to plan, but my masterful, manic, manipulative, mindless mouth wasn't getting much of a chance to shine… *I wonder why?*

"Despite the magnificence of my acting, when Stalker Girl analyzed me before, I didn't captivate the audience in the slightest. This time I'm not even getting a speech!"

“Nobody was captivated! You were holding us hostage with your nonsense speech, that’s all!”

“Unbelievable!” I cried. “After all my long years of recognition as a brilliant actor, cast time and time again in the role of the ‘Tree’—and *excelling* in said role, in fact—my peerless monologues bring gasps to all who witness them. The audience cries out, adoringly, ‘What a terrifying boy!’ That’s how good I am! I can show you, if you like?”

“Hard pass!” Class Rep shouted. “The last time you were cast as a tree, you just put an actual tree on the stage! That wasn’t perfect acting, it was *a tree*! Just a straight up object, a two-story-tall plant with roots! So when we put on *Cinderella*, and *The Little Mermaid*, there was still a freakin’ tree in the middle of the stage getting in everyone’s way! Since when do trees grow underwater? You think we could just hand-wave that away?! *Yeah*, everyone was terrified of you!”

Ah, my first glare in the capital, from none other than Lord Glare Rep. Wow. So people had realized I wasn’t actually the tree?

“N-no, you don’t get it, my acting was so perfect that I literally *became* the tree…in which case, wouldn’t an actual tree do the job?”

I got glared at, but I held my ground. At least my tree was good for the ozone layer and carbon sequestration and all that. Why were people so upset with me?

Out here in the capital there was a different style of building, but only one. They were all made of stone.

“Oh, I could do some Earth-magic, stone-golem town planning over here?”

Those buildings were super sturdy. And if I asked them to, they might just stand up and join a battle. H-hang on, did that mean there could be an on-demand girls’ bath golem?! I’m in! Let’s go, golem! But if I called and some old dude bath golem showed up instead, I might just have to burn this whole city to the ground. No old-dude oopsies daisies for me, please?

“Why are old dudes oopsy-daisying in the first place?! I’ll burn ’em up! I’ll rip ’em apart for that!”

“Hellloo, Haruka-kun?” It was Class Rep. “You can’t just start renovating the capital, okay?”

“We can see that you’re flattening the street or something—what exactly are you trying to do?”

“And whatever you *are* trying to do, why the hell are you muttering ‘eeeep, my panties!’ to yourself over and over again? This calls for a lecture!”

“We’re infiltrating enemy territory and you’re squealing about panties to yourself! What the hell is going on?”

“Oh no! I’ve been caught!”

Since when was I muttering? Listen, you never knew when you might spot a girl’s panties on the capital road, okay? Now they were lobbing rules at me like a baby boomer brigade or something? I was focused on saving their grandkids! When did they show up?

“Look, if the boomers show up, they’ll probably just start shouting about how swords and magic are dangerous and then get their heads bitten off by kobolds, so who needs them? They’d just get in the way. And think of how they’d harass those innocent chompy kobolds!”

Don’t think the kobolds would dig the taste of a boomer.

“The slums are ahead,” said Class Rep. “It could be dangerous. Everyone…keep an eye on Haruka-kun!”

“Okay.”

Hang on, why did they have to protect the slums from me?! Oh, wait, I got it. My radiantly pure purity was so powerful that it could damage anyone who came into contact with it. The type of goodness that would pickpocket pickpockets, defraud thieves, chop the heads off of head-cutting murderers. It provided a harmonious and safe environment to my immediate surroundings in general, ya know? The biggest problem was that everyone here was poor so there was no easy way to make cash. Still, maybe some of the criminals I planned to criminalize would be beautiful women.

“Yup, I’m here to fix up this fixer-upper town, and get a fix on foxy females while I’m at it! Yup, time to send out an invitation: sexy female

thieves, sexy female murderers! You can strip me of *everything* that I have! Just strip me!"

"What is he doing, pumping his fist like that?!"

This slum might be more marvelous than anticipated. As we crept down a narrow alleyway, the stone buildings shifted to wood and got progressively shabbier as we kept going…huh?!

"Damn you, fantasy world! You neglect the art of wooden architecture! What horrible use of wood! Stone isn't so much better! Why are wooden buildings only in the slums?! They don't understand the arts and architecture of Asia! Curse this world!"

"He got so angry out of nowhere. What's going on?"

The "nice" buildings were just piles of rocks. They had three thousand years of development before they were ready to pick a fight with wooden buildings! Maybe five thousand! No, these stinking barbarians had no regard for cultural advancement! *Damn them…*

"Hellllllo? Haruka-kun! Please stop renovating the city everywhere you go!"

"He's reworking them into Buddhist temples and Shinto shrine-inspired wooden buildings. Why?!"

"I have no idea, but now he's building a five-story pagoda in the middle of enemy territory!"

"Haruka-kun, this is a fantasy world, not Kyoto, okay?"

Uh, I kinda just lost my cool and fixed it. At least now this barbaric, backwater fantasy world would understand the beauty of Japanese architecture and just how sophisticated wooden buildings could be. *This place is kinda pretty now?*

"This slum looks like an upscale neighborhood all of a sudden?"

"We never got to go on our school trip this year. Why do I get a feeling this is just like Kyoto?"

It upset me that wooden houses were considered shabby in this world. People here needed to understand the wonders of wooden architecture. But

unfortunately I couldn't perfectly remake Kyoto. There were no geishas here.

"I spent my whole high school life dreaming of my school trip to Kyoto amid giggling geishas, but instead I got sent to a fantasy world before I ever got the chance! If you're gonna send me here, at least send some geishas too! Treat me to a banquet, at least! And dancing! Come on!"

But no geishas appeared.

"Now the slum is kinda, like, stylish, right?" Vice Rep B said.

"Yeah, the nobles' residences were just made of stone."

"The wooden buildings look way more warm and inviting."

"Back in Japan, I used to think Western-style houses were so cool, but this feels more homey."

"Yeah, the capital did its best but…now this slum has got Todaiji Temple and everything?"

Victory was mine.

"If you compare them directly, this area definitely looks richer now."

"Yeah, now those stone houses look like trashy old piles of rocks!"

"So, can we really follow through with kicking those poor nobles out of the city?"

I got good reviews from modern teenage girls, at least. Unfortunately, there was no waterfall around so I couldn't build Kiyomizudera Temple, and didn't abstain from using stone in my fire-prevention walls. There! Way more comfortable for daily life than dwellings made completely out of stone. *Don't mess around with East Asian architecture, you ignorant fantasy world,* I thought. Melt away, you miserable stone buildings!

"Oh, man," the girls sighed.

"I think the proper reaction is more like *'What the heeell?!'* "

Now those nobles should be properly ashamed of their medieval architecture. *I mean, doesn't it just piss you off that the nobles are living in luxury right next to such extreme poverty?* Consider the playing field leveled.

If they tried to brag, you could just snort and say, “You’re basically living in a bunch of rocks. No better than stone golems, *losers*!” and then they’d run away crying. I’d feel bad for ’em if it happened… Maybe I could send them off with wooden swords as a consolation prize. They didn’t have any special effects, but I couldn’t have everyone wandering around with powerful clubs in *this* town, too! Too many wooden sticks in town spelled trouble for any poor invading goblins and kobolds. They’d lose all their will to attack.

“He’s even gotten permission to set up a food stall!”

“That second division commander is listening to everything he says! What is he thinking?!”

“I guess we’re just moving stores, but we don’t have to bring anything with us…”

“Uh, guys, just so you know, we are technically still in enemy territory? We’re here to kick out the enemies, not take everything over! Although, we have official permits for entering and doing business, so the only real problem is that massive problem of a person right over there. But I can’t do anything about him. Just keep an eye out.”

“Yes, Rep!”

I set out for the orphanage that I spotted with Map. Orphanages tended to be poor in fantasy worlds, so once I saved them, the lovely ladies within would be so grateful to me. Think of all the various expressive ways the sexy orphans would express their thanks to me…but, uh, this orphanage was a dump? For real? Everything was rotting and decrepit, even the wood. It was a miracle that this wreckage of a home was even standing.

Kids came rushing out of the building, all of them dirty and frail, pasty, and wearing nothing but rags. *Dang, we kinda match? No, mine are black! Their rags aren’t black!* Every garment in sight was worn ragged, frayed, and full of holes.

“Haruka-kun, please!”

“You can use my salary!”

“Just help these kids, please! I beg you!”

The girls burst into tears on seeing the kids. Don't blame the kiddos! These kids would be beautiful if they weren't so filthy.

Wait, no, not in a creepy way! See, the angel-faced little girls' blonde hair was all so dirty. The red-haired boys would be incredibly handsome if they washed their soot-stained faces. But no, they were dirty as can be, living in brick wreckage liable to collapse at any moment. No wonder the girls were shocked! Even in the frontier we hadn't seen anything like this. Despite the domain's poverty, everyone helped one another. Even Mr. Meridad was poor, but he still prioritized the funds for an orphanage even before his own palace.

In the duchy, whether it was orphans, or the injured, or the sick, everyone was equally poor and did everything they can to help each other. But here, these poor kids were abandoned. They were thrown away.

"Unbelievable…"

"Mushrooms! Sell me mushrooms, Haruka-kun! I'll pay you anything!"

"Me too!"

Princess Girl said that the royal family provided funds for the orphanage's operation. So where had their funds disappeared to? They were the royal family's funds, but administered by the nobles, apparently.

The royals did not typically enter the noble quarter of the city, so when Princess Girl told me she had never been here before, I drew her a map. More than a few people needed to see this place. Especially the neglectful nobles.

Yes, they needed an intensive, all-day course on this rotting wreckage of an orphanage, and these sickly, suffering children, and where exactly those funds went. I'd rub their noses in it.

First things first—orphanage. I could turn the noble quarter into hell quarter later. That lovely, pristine noble quarter built on funds intended to restore this rotting, ruined wreck could be dealt with later. Vengeance later was always fine, but never first. First, the orphanage. Above all else, the orphanage.

DAY 66

MORNING

Didn't the Mother Mary say, "If you can't give me a reward, then lemme rip ya off," and stuff?

DIORELLE CAPITAL

SLUM QUARTER

AFTER OUR VILLAGE DISAPPEARED, and Mother and Father died, they brought me here.

A place where I was always hungry. It was impossible to get full off the thin, watery soup and stale bread that we had to share.

The orphanage was cold. The wind blew through the crumbling walls. I fell asleep shivering under thin blankets, with my stomach grumbling. We were desperately poor. All the kids, big and small, went to work, but we still couldn't afford to buy enough food. No matter what we tried, we stayed poor.

After work today, I went home. Huge as the city was, there was nowhere else for me to go there. I bought a little food. I needed to. If I didn't, the little ones were sure to starve. I could work all day long, late into the night—we all could—but there would never be enough food. We were all hungry, all the time.

As I wondered if I made enough today to get food for myself, I turned the corner and saw the orphanage—*no! The orphanage?!*

Where did the orphanage go? I didn't have anywhere to go now. The orphanage was all I had, and it had disappeared.

A giant, palatial mansion stood where the orphanage had been. What happened to all the little kids? Were they okay? With nothing else to do, with nowhere else to go, I ran around the outside of the mansion, looking for the little kids.

"Big Sis, it's over here!"

“And they’ve got tasty food!”

“We can eat as much as we want!”

The little kids waved at me from the window of the mansion. They were inside. They were inside the mansion eating as much as they wanted. We were being a nuisance to the owner! I ran in to apologize. I apologized with all my might. *Please,* I begged, *forgive the little ones, I’ll pay you back for what they ate.* I offered all the money I had.

I bowed my head again and again. *I’m sorry, forgive us.*

Then…they embraced me?

The room was filled with beautiful teenage girls with pitch-black hair and pitch-black eyes. They were so soft and smelled divine. They felt almost motherly.

“It’s okay now. Everyone’s allowed to eat here.”

“We brought all this food for you to eat. Go ahead and have your fill.”

A feast was laid out on the table, all sorts of delicious-looking foods that I’d never seen in my life. All of the kids were laughing and smiling as they ate up, shouting at me to join them.

Behind them, a black-haired, black-eyed boy was preparing the food. He was cooking and setting up the dishes at an incredible pace.

“Chow down, eat up, gotta grow up big! To grow up big, you gotta eat, and if you don’t eat… Well, sad stuff might totally happen! Although, sad stuff is already happening, so just eat, right? N-no, I’m not saying that you’re small, I’m just thinking my unlimited thoughts into existence, but you’re right, it probably doesn’t need to be said? Ahem ahem, hem hem hem, do I sense a morning star in here? Miss Armor Rep lent that to you, did she? Yeah, I figured that was the morning star that I’m oh-so familiar with… Speaking of which, why is the morning star the only darn thing you attack me with?!”

It was so fun. Everyone was laughing and smiling. Even me.

I ate so much. I told everyone that it was the first time in my life that I had eaten so much food, and such delicious food.

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet! The true terror is the one-more-set that happens *after* you eat the delicious delight known as manju, but plenty of those girls have progressed beyond the need for seconds—*urrrrrgh!* Don’t share the morning star around like that! And don’t have it battle-ready, either! If I end up powering it up with mithril, I’ll be screwed! I mean, if Miss Armor Rep showed up in a nurse outfit saying ‘I’ll nurse you right up with some mithril, baby,’ my misfit teenage-boy heart might explode! I mean, a girl in a nurse outfit offering to nurse me up…*wagh, waaaaaaarghmmmmph!*”

They were so lively! It was so much fun, and the food was so good. They were all so kind.

I was so happy to be hugged like that. They held my hand and patted my head.

“Just try your best,” they said. “After all that work, no reward? Unbelievable!” and, “If they don’t give you cash, just rip ’em off, ya vibe?”

They promised me that we would get what we deserved for our work, all of us, forever and ever from this day forward. The boy said that he had decided as much, so he would rip the nobles off, and he patted my head.

“I mean, you can solve most societal problems with a little whacking and ripping off. Pretty sure some famous old dude said so? Well, nobody knows if he said it or not, but I guess that means it’s not a famous saying, so who cares? Ya know?”

I’d get a reward for working, and would continue to be rewarded every day for the rest of my life. That’s what they said. And they patted my head. It felt so nice.

I was so glad to have never given up. Now I knew how it felt to be happy. Today was the most fun I’d ever had. I decided to keep working hard, to never give up. *If I keep going, then more happy days like today will come again.*

All the kids laughed until they cried and laughed again. So overcome with happiness, so utterly delighted that the tears flowed. I couldn’t believe it. Normally, we cried because we were hungry, or cold, or lonely, or hurt, or felt sad, or suffered. This time, it was because we were so happy.

“Changing time!”

“Here, take some of my clothes!”

“Yeah, mine too!”

They showed us to our rooms in the giant mansion. They told us this wasn’t a mansion: it was the orphanage, and it was our home now. There was even a giant bath. I had seen a bath once before but…this was amazing.

Amazing! *I get to take a bath!* The girls helped wash me. They all sparkled. *I’m getting so pretty, just like a noble!*

“All right, time to wash your heads next,” one of the girls called. “Line up now!”

“Okaaay!”

No one could stop crying. We could hardly believe it. Having our bellies full of delicious food, getting to take a bath… To feel so happy all at once. What would we do tomorrow?

“Don’t worry about a thing. It’s okay now, it’s okay now.”

“Yeah, the guy in the black cloak said so!”

“I want him to keep smiling! I want everyone to keep smiling!”

“And that’s why it’s going to be okay now,” the black-haired girl said. “He’ll make sure everyone keeps smiling.”

“Yeah, you’re going to be happy now,” the other girls chimed in. “Because he makes sure of it.”

Everyone burst into tears again, the big kids and small kids alike. We were all so happy already. They said that every day would be like this from now on. How could it possibly keep going? We were already so happy. So happy that nobody could forget this day for the rest of our lives.

They hung up a sign.

“I took it over!” the boy suddenly shouted, and all the girls got mad at him.

Apparently the orphanage was the “Souvenir Shop Orphanage Branch Ya Know? Ya Feel?” now.

Starting tomorrow, we would get to wear pretty clothes and help in the shop in exchange for delicious meals. They had beautiful clothes prepared for all of us in every size. Uniforms.

Now the boy was shouting “labor force, acquired!” in a loud voice, and the girls got mad at him again.

They were giving out lots of food outside of the orphanage too, and making the houses beautiful. All of the townspeople were crying now, too. The small kids, the big kids, and the grown-ups too, all of them had started to cry.

Nobody would be cold anymore. They gave out warm, fluffy futons. The wind would no longer blow through the walls. Our stomachs were so full that they hurt.

But no one was crying at bedtime. All the kids cried all day long, but when it came time to sleep, nobody cried anymore. The little kids slept with smiles on their faces. Today, for the first time.

I never knew how nice it was to be so full and warm.

DAY 66

EVENING

Despite long, long years of service and successive battle after battle, they were too scared to say anything.

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

HARUKA-KUN MADE the decision to move even though we literally just set up shop outside the capital. Why did he make new buildings every day? And why was Angelica-san wearing a bus guide outfit…? *Don't tell me she's taking us on a Kyoto bus tour? Without the bus?*

He was talking nonsense as always. And as always, everyone ignored him.

"Since ancient times, it's been possible to burst through enemy blockades. You just need to find the weak point, burst through, and then bust up the defenseless enemy. So we're moving! Branch promotion time!"

I was pretty sure that enemy blockades had nothing to do with moving. Moving inside enemy territory wouldn't protect us at all. And why was he conflating moving with battle tactics to begin with? I should ask for an explanation…actually, you know what? No. I was good.

So, we held a closing sale. "Now that we've opened up the Capital Branch we can close the Capital-Front Branch! Enjoy bargains today and today alone in a blowout sale! A one-hour limited sale with jaw-dropping unbeatable bargains! That's right, everything is 10 percent off! Well, I raised all the prices on the downlow, so it's 10 percent off the raised prices. But 10 percent off is 10 percent off! I'll be making hella stacks tonight! Just a hunch, ya know?" The whole world trembled at his cry!

"Graaaaaah!"

The fantasy-world maiden wars had begun! That's right, a bargain sale! Guest starring all of the medieval women in the capital, baited here by

the sale. The sweet words of “cheap” and “bargain” and “limited”—who could resist their venomous charm? Men and women, young and old, stormed the souvenir shop. This wasn’t a maiden war; this was all-out regular war.

It hadn’t reached the level of a bargain sale yet. There was still breathing room, after all. For now, word of mouth was on our side. Word would spread of the mind-blowing deals. *More are coming!*

And come, they did. The champions. The demise that reaped the end of all maiden wars. The grizzled, veteran warriors themselves: the middle-aged ladies. Known by the words whispered only in fear and terror by the men of this world—the housewives!

The housewives sprung into the battlefield. They blasted the fledgling and furious maiden front with a brutal charge, splitting the battlefield with their rampaging attacks, scattering us in their merciless plunder of the splendid sales. The housewives unleashed their charge and left chaos in their wake.

This was a rampage. This was hell. Even the former Dungeon Emperor was trembling! She had tears of terror in her eyes. Yes, the housewives were so scary that they made a Dungeon Emperor tremble with fear. We maidens didn’t stand a chance. And then—everything, sold out.

“Good work. We’re cleared out now, so…moving time? And what should I do with the Capital-Front Branch anyway? I guess I can just give it to Mr. Meridad. He just got here and all?”

A battalion of horseback knights were on their way. One knight rushed ahead of the pack, Lord Omui. And another knight was desperately racing to catch up, probably his advisor. He looked distressed, as usual. Haruka-kun had even made him special equipment with Super-Speed, but he still couldn’t keep up with Lord Omui. Although, since Lord Omui also had Super-Speed equipment made by Haruka-kun, the fact that the advisor couldn’t keep up was actually Haruka-kun’s fault. *When you really think about it, most things are Haruka-kun’s fault anyway.*

“Sorry for being late,” Lord Omui said. “Retrieving and reorganizing the Imperial Guard is the next step, but that could be difficult. Why did you build a fortress in the middle of the capital? Is the castle not safe enough? Don’t tell me you destroyed it?”

“Hey! This is, like, perfect,” Haruka-kun said. “This palace just conveniently opened up and I was looking for some way to use it, so feel free to use it as your base. I mean, I built it and all, so destroying it makes it feel like I’m not taking advantage of you—I mean it, ya know? The Second Division old dude gave me a business permit, so we’re moving! More importantly, I’ve nabbed some free crying labor so I can flex my millionaire might as a headmaster too, so look, you can have it. I don’t need it!”

The Souvenir Shop Capital-Front Branch would become Omui’s army base. Lord Omui had no idea what Haruka-san was talking about, but he seemed to understand that he would get a fortress out of it. It was just as well. Whenever Lord Omui tried to understand Haruka-kun, he became incomprehensible himself. Our speech habits were all pretty ruined. Haruka-kun’s speech style was just infectious like that. Lord Omui would be next…you know?

“Look, I don’t understand, but sure. I would like to request some interpretation if possible.”

Bit by bit, the Imperial Guard and frontier army assembled, and Haruka-kun expanded the building to accommodate them. But Book Club President was standing on top of the building roof. That meant that from afar, nobody could see the army that was assembling.

That’s right: the massive army standing right outside the city gates couldn’t be seen from the capital. This was the power of the “Non-Existence Ring: Forced hiding. Identification isolation. Perception estrangement.” This was the holy magic item that Haruka-kun had used to hide the army in the attack on the first prince, magnified by the permeation effect of the Ripple Necklace and its anti-resist effects, nullifying any skills by the enemy that would counter it. You could call Book Club President’s special items Haruka’s trump cards.

“All right, we’re all done here, so let’s move,” I sighed.

“Let’s goooo!”

“The orphans are waiting for us, you know.”

The kids loved Haruka-kun, as usual. I was worried about his negative influence on them. Kids inevitably imitated him, which risked an

influx of some pretty terrifying Haruka-kun copies… For whatever reason, kids loved him, and that was that.

"We need to teach them that they can't copy him!"

A city overrun with mini-Haruka-kuns would be unspeakably dangerous. Compared to that, the battlefield and dungeons were nothing.

"Well, no matter how much they want to, I suppose copying him is technically impossible, right?"

"That's our only hope!"

Yup, no one *could* imitate him…fortunately. No reason to be worried. And if they could…*then we'll just have to quarantine him!*

Then, led by our bus guide, we made our way to the orphanage. Not by bus, of course. The overworked orphans gazed vacantly at the newly built, ancient-looking homes, their eyes widened in shock as we made our way to the orphanage. Yep, I resigned myself to not think too hard about any of this. It was like a weird mock school trip. Soon enough, though —*"How the heck did the Phoenix Hall get here?!"* The other girls made the comments I would've anyway.

Those of us who already went with Haruka-kun to the orphanage at lunchtime had no further comments to make on the action. We had been making them all day. I was comment-drained. I was dead exhausted from saying things like, "What, are you going to make it a five-star fortress and rain fire down from its ramparts?" Yup, the orphanage was the Phoenix Hall, although this one had no moat. I guess there wasn't room for it.

The first priority had to be making sure the kids were fed. They were safe and warm and cleaned up now, whether they were living in the Phoenix Hall or an Edo-period fortress or the ancient Izumo Shrine itself. Actually, they could live in any of those. He'd made replicas of all of them here.

On my second time seeing all this architectural mayhem, it dawned on me how ridiculous it was. It had felt mostly normal back when he did it. *I'm just tired from my constant commenting.*

Yeah, this was definitely messed up. He'd put *neon* on the buildings! What time period were we in?

“Welcome back!” the kids chanted at us, every one of them smiling. We could barely recognize them, they were so clean and happy. They were still skinny, and they looked so exhausted. But still, they smiled angelically. They waved at us, grinning, shouting, and laughing. Their previous vacant expressions of hopeless, exhausted misery were gone.

“Hi there!”

Everyone was overwhelmed with joy.

Except one person. One person was not smiling.

As soon as the princess, Lady Shalliceres, arrived at the orphanage, she faced the children and kneeled before them. She bowed as if to strike the floor with her head, sobbing with shame. On the way over, we talked about it: how the children got into this terrible situation. We discussed it thoroughly. Haruka-kun didn’t say anything. The princess *couldn’t* say anything.

She had been too grief-stricken to say a word. The children must’ve felt abandoned—abandoned by their country, their king. But that was why she had come all this way on foot. She would offer atonement to the children abandoned by their kingdom—the discarded children of Diorelle.

“Don’t cry, sis!”

“Did you get a boo-boo?”

She wept and wept.

There was no point in excuses or apologies. Nothing to say to undo it, nothing left to do to rescue them. All she could do was ram her forehead into the floor, wailing, as if to wound herself. This place had uncovered the truth of the kingdom she had sworn to protect. Of the people she pledged to serve. These small children had been thrown into the dirt to suffer and die. As the princess of Diorelle, all she could do was lower her head lower, lower, lower.

“It’s okay, sis! Don’t worry!”

“Come inside already!”

These were the children she had failed to protect. It wasn’t up to us to offer her false comfort. That would only disgrace a princess who had put her life on the line to protect her people. It would insult a royal family that

had guarded the people of Diorelle for untold generations to tell her she'd done nothing wrong. All we could do was tell her the truth: that the orphans were on the verge of death, starving and sick. That if Haruka-kun hadn't had mushroom potions on him, they might have actually died. That the weakest children in Diorelle had been abandoned in this pit of suffering and death. Buried in the capital were the graves of untold, tiny lives.

For her to not even be aware of this was a grave sin. She had pledged to protect the people, after all. And though she might wail, and suffer, and regret, and grovel, she had no choice but to rise again. Past crimes couldn't be fixed. All she could do from here was move forward and do better. If she didn't, she would lose not only the past, but the future, too.

Maybe it was a good thing that the princess didn't see Haruka-kun's face. That she didn't see his silent expression as he gazed on the noble quarter as we passed by. His smile. It was a kindly smile. We'd seen that smile on his face as monsters begged for their lives in their dying moments. He smiled as he sent them on to hell.

DAY 66

EVENING

I forgot to get a construction permit, so let's keep it a secret that these buildings are illegal.

DIORELLE CAPITAL

BEHIND THE LUXURIOUS nobles' quarter, the slums lay in the capital's shadow. It was a den of forced labor near the business district, sucked of all its resources by the nobles' quarter beyond. A place for the poor. If the slum quarter were to slide into an even more abject state, the people of the slums would have no choice but to work in the business district operated by the Merchant Kingdom as slaves for life. The nobles hadn't stopped it. It was in their best interest to look the other way.

Special districts were shields wielded by the nobility to create inviolable, separate zones of residence. People from one district could not enter the others. No one extended a hand to the slum quarter, and any aid was siphoned away long before it reached them. While the royal family forbid slavery in Diorelle, the greedy merchants found a replacement that was nearly as good: the people of the slums.

He wanted into the slums. That black-haired, black-eyed boy sought a permit to enter with such favorable terms, all to disperse massive quantities of food and aid and build a souvenir shop. I had no objections to those terms. I might disagree with his objectives, but I had no way of presuming the boy's ultimate design. All I needed to do was obey. Fulfill his orders, as best as I could.

I immediately retrieved a permit from the second prince and the council of lords, entrusting him with complete stewardship and responsibility along with a business and entrance permit. It was a dirty deal, and it required a few bribes to the nobility to make it happen, but it was not my place to question the boy's decisions.

Indeed, I found myself believing that the boy could achieve what no one had before. He could bring light to the slum quarter. We exchanged no more than a few words, but no one else could so easily disregard the fetters of this city. Call it hubris, but I saw my wildest dreams in those dark, black eyes.

And before I had time to think that I had hoped for too much, the commotion began. By the time the news had spread across the slum quarter, the nobles were practically rioting. It was presumptuous of me to trust them for anything. My dreams were still impossible. The hopes of aid, protection, improvements—these greedy, plundering lords would do everything in their power to seize it for themselves.

"The nobles are panicking. It's chaos!"

"What is going on?!"

No one could understand what was happening, which could only mean one culprit. There was no use in trying to comprehend his designs. His goals were on a plane beyond our understanding, and our inability to understand was merely a sign of our own limited vision.

He led us through the muck to achieve the incomprehensible. It was foolish to try to understand that which could not be understood. If it could be done, I'd have already done it.

Now the city was crawling with nobles demanding answers. The capital was overrun with them!

"Seize that building. We will not permit our capital to be defiled by repugnant worms! Drive them out!"

"Those are *our* plots of land in *our* noble quarter! Deploy the army at once!"

"It is in an unforgivable crime to defy the will of the lords. It would be a more fitting punishment to confiscate the boy's fortune, would it not?"

These foolish, squawking nobles. Their crudeness boggled the mind. They did not understand what it meant for that fortress to appear out of the ether. That the capital had already fallen—a sword was pointed at our necks.

“He has an authorized permit, issued by the second prince and the chief of the noble council, to transfer and operate a souvenir shop within the slum quarters. Likewise, he has permission to both operate the establishment and pass through the territory. We have no cause to confiscate these permits, and certainly none to enter the slum quarter. The slum quarter may as well be a colony of Omui by this point. As we speak, currency and food are flooding the local economy, with resources invested into architectural and city development. May I suggest an official transfer of territorial rights? It may dispose them positively to us in the coming negotiations.”

But with the incompetence of these nobles, could negotiations even commence? They couldn’t even comprehend the position we were in.

“And all of those supplies of foodstuffs we received from the Merchant Kingdom. Are they seriously demanding that we leave the crates unopened?!”

“Despite their so-called aid, our coffers are empty. Whatever happened to those shipments? They were supposed to have arrived, but I couldn’t find goods anywhere but in that souvenir shop. Is the emergency aid vanishing? Or going elsewhere?”

Empty stores. Did they think us grateful for aid that never arrived? Were the shipments getting stolen, diverted? Had they even existed? These merchants lacked any honor.

“And now they treat us like we’re indebted to them. What nonsense!”

“Our duty as the Second Division is to defend the capital in case of an outside invasion. Any matters within the city walls should be handled by the military police, and in our contract, we have been ordered to ignore the operations of any merchants. Furthermore, the citizenry have purchased the frontier wooden swords in droves, as well as their protective cloaks. They are no longer defenseless. They possess better equipment than our own soldiers. In the case of a conflict, who will win—a handful of police, or the might of the citizenry? Our hands are tied. If the citizenry suffer harm, we will view it as violation of the contract and have no choice but to act against you.”

Princess Shalliceres had returned, and even Duke Omui had made his presence known outside the capital. Why did the second prince insist on

stepping on the tiger's tail? I was certainly surprised when I heard that Lord Omui volunteered to lead the frontier army, but after seeing the state of the slum quarter, I could understand his actions. He must have been spurred on by that boy. I suspected he was also involved in the strange rumors I'd heard from the Theocracy and Merchant Kingdom.

But the nobles understood nothing. They continued to preen and pout in their little world. Meanwhile, that boy's threat loomed above them.

"Then we shall move the police! Don't you dare intervene!"

"If we do not intervene the capital shall fall," I stated. "Is that what you want?"

The situation had changed. Larger forces were on the move. And yet, they still could not see it.

"You *dare* threaten us?! If you're going to shirk your duty to defend the capital, then we'll put an end to your contract and your life!"

"I am simply stating a fact," I said, "not a threat. Meanwhile, *you* threaten our citizenry with the police. If you open the door to a war on your own citizenry, this city is done for. Look outside—the flag of Omui and the sword of Princess Shalliceres await you. When faced with that sword and that flag, what citizens would even think to obey the second prince? Who do you think they will choose?"

These incompetent fools were being spurred by blind ambition. Everyone knew what outcome awaited them. But these lords and the Merchant Kingdom saw nothing but gold. That boy—just how far beyond us all did he see?

"I will state this only once," I said. "If you assault the citizenry, the Second Division will no longer be your ally. We will defend our capital and defend the fortress. Choose your side."

The room fell silent.

All the nobles glared at me. Their greed truly was boundless. They wanted everything for themselves. Those magnificent wooden buildings existed nowhere else in the entire continent. And now, residing in this magnificent architecture was the neglected populace of the slum quarter. When I heard of this development, I couldn't help but laugh.

It wasn't mine to understand the mind or background of this mysterious boy. If he was recognized by the princess and Duke Omui, that was all I needed to know.

Delightful. The people thrown away by the capital now looked down on the entire noble quarter while the nobles stared up at the slums in envy. What a thrill! I had never seen such a breathtaking reversal in my lifetime. Even if he was our enemy, the boy merited recognition. And if he was on our side, then what was there to add to perfection?

My subordinate, who left to investigate the slum quarter, had just returned.

"Any change in the orphanage?"

"The shop has officially opened. The orphanage has been fixed up and the children are wearing beautiful clothes, working in the shop with smiles on their faces. Everyone in the slum quarter is elated."

That was an image I'd carry with me while trying to talk sense into those foolish nobles. With a single permit to set up shop, the impossible had been achieved.

I just need to listen to him. I couldn't understand the boy, but if I followed his lead, change was possible. I could not see from his majestic heights. But I could follow someone who saw farther than I did. If the people of the slums were smiling, that was all the reason I needed.

DAY 66

NIGHT

I said I discerned a distinguishing method, so why do I get dissed for dishing it?

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

THOSE POOR PRIVATE SOLDIERS sent by the noble quarter got lost every time. They must have been scared. Quaking. Every time a group of them ventured into those winding mock-Kyoto streets of the slum quarter, a few of them inevitably got lost in one of the tiny little capillary-like streets and never returned. Just as realization set in, along with the beginnings of panic, they'd decide to withdraw. It was then they lost their way, unable to advance, stuck wandering the temples and shrines of central Kyoto—until, one by one, each of them was alone. Isolated in this never-ending Kyoto replica.

Oh, yeah, I should mention—the ground is a conveyor belt. See, that's why you're not getting any further!

"I threw in an Illusion? And stuff?"

"You don't need to pull a horror-movie stunt like that! I didn't realize it was an illusion!"

"Me neither!"

That was why only people with permission could enter the slum quarter. I provided slum quarter Entry Rings for the local population, so they were fine. Anyone else who tried to enter could only go to the souvenir shop. I wouldn't let them go anywhere else. They'd already taken enough. No more. This wasn't a place to rip off; it was a place to get ripped off *in*.

Oh, and the slum quarter Entry Rings were lavish spellstone rings that gave +DEF and 10% boosts to Power, Speed, and Dexterity. Yeah, the girls got pissed at me. It ended up in a lecture. But what was the big deal?

“These barrier-inducing items really expend too much magic, ya feel?” I said. “It’s all well and good when I can share my magic, but using this many spellstones will put me in the red fast.”

I needed to shrink them down and make them cost- and energy-efficient. The only road you could enter without a Slum Quarter Ring went straight to the “Souvenir Shop Orphanage Branch Ya Know? Ya Feel?” Because I felt generous, I extended the safe zone to the streets around Fushimi Inari Shrine. Walk anywhere else, you got lost. The souvenir shop was the only valid destination.

Now I just needed to take custody of all the customers wandering around outside of the store. They were pretty Spirited Away. Where were all the gods and spirits to take care of them, anyway? I wouldn’t want them to get transformed into pigs for eating too much or anything. *This is giving me some pretty nasty ideas. Better not lay out any mapo tofu where they can see it.*

“They’re still coming.”

“Oh, and they’re gone.”

“So where do they go?”

“Like, over there…underground.”

“That’s a lot spookier than a real-life Fushimi Inari shrine!”

“It’s like they’re *actually* getting spirited away!”

“A Spirited Away show designed by a certain individual.”

“Yeah, he got pretty *carried* away.”

“You’re the one who has started enforcing the transit permits with eternal punishment! Why drag spirits into it?!”

As those unwanted tourists helplessly wandered the back-streets of this new Kyoto, I *may* have set some hallucination-centric traps! Better watch your feet, ’cause there are some new pitfalls about! Whoops, there they go. Old dudes plunging deep into an underground abyss, one after the next. But what do I *do* with them? What do you do with an old dude? Bury or incinerate, I guess. Even unlawful dumping could work.

“Seriously, what’s with this nasty rash of old dudes in this world? They just don’t stop coming at me!”

I tried asking the nerds. According to them, pretty much all the characters in isekai stories should be sexy chicks. And yet, despite all my burning-and-dumping efforts, the old dudes didn’t stop coming.

“An outbreak of pissed-off seventeen-year-old boys just might create an old-dude annihilation weapon at this rate!”

What was the elemental weakness of old dudes, anyhow? Their wives? No, I couldn’t import a ton of old ladies just to get rid of the old dude problem. Upsetting the delicate ecosystem of the maiden (bargain) wars would result in the obliteration of the entire universe. That would be my last resort. My ultimate weapon for destroying this world.

“Good night, Haruka! Good night, everyone!”

A group of kids in pajamas appeared. *Aw, lookit those sleepy little eyes.*

“Good night, sleep tight! ’Cause you gotta or you won’t grow up, ya know? It’d be a tragedy if you all wound up like Little Miss Tiny Animal! So…please sleep a lot and stuff.”

It looked like it was the older group of kids going to bed now. Well, the big kids. ’Cause I had no idea how old they actually were.

“Good night!”

My best guess was that the big kids were a little over ten, but looked younger due to malnourishment. Didn’t matter so long as they were happy, though. They had lots of food and lots of energy now, although they hadn’t overcome their years of deficiency by any means. Some were tiny, but they’d get better in the long run.

While the girls staffed the souvenir store, some of them also taught the kids lessons. The knowledge they passed on far outstripped the educational standards of this world. If the kids could learn reading, arithmetic, and basic business knowledge, I could give the whole store over to them when they grew up. We could turn this orphanage into a full-fledged business.

Until then, we would take care of everything until they grew up. We'd give them everything they needed to take on the world.

"That noble quarter is blocking the good sunlight. Part of me wants to just burn it down, convert it into a vacant lot, build a dungeon there and throw all the nobles inside, but that'd probably scare off the Merchant Kingdom. I could make it a shallow dungeon so they wouldn't need to be scared, but really, I'm down for anything that would tick off those nobles. Anyone else want to submit ideas? Come on! Whoever comes up with the best idea gets a luxurious set of manju, and the one-more-set of workouts that inevitably accompany it! Ya know?"

"Luxurious manju?! Let's do it!"

That would inspire the girls to come up with ideas for me. But they didn't seem to be taking the workout part of it seriously. In fact, they were deliberately ignoring that part!

I didn't know enough nobles to begin with. Not like you could rely on them in the first place. Same went for the Merimeris. I guess I *could* go ask that capital leader dude. *I wanna find out about any local sex shops too! And why do I suddenly sense twenty enemies around me? Yeah, no adult shops for me so long as that morning star is around.*

I used Presence Sensing to find the leader dude… *He's outside? Oh, in the barracks. Pretty lowly lifestyle for a leader dude.*

"Knock knock? I'm here! This isn't a joke, though, I swear! I'm the agreeable youth running the totally not-exploitative souvenir shop business? Huh? Why does phrasing that way make me suddenly feel guilty? Anyway, I had something I wanted to ask the second-division leader dude, so is now a good time? If there's sexy stuff going on I'll wait till it's done! Normally, I'd be happy to watch and learn…but if it's BL shit, this city's getting burned!"

I could tell from Presence Sensing that he was alone, so there were no sexy men, most likely. Thank god, to be honest.

"Welcome! You need not have witnessed the shambles of my humble abode; if you were to call, I would come at once. Is there an emergency of some sort?"

I talked about doing stuff to upset and anger the nobles, and he burst out laughing. I had already done enough, apparently. Kidding! It could never be enough. Not that I was really doing anything in the first place. ’Cause nothing was ever my fault, I swear!

“I see that you have erected magnificent, severe wooden structures and enforced a strict entry barrier. That has already enraged the nobles tremendously. They have been frothing at the mouths all day, ranting and raving. Your tactics are working.”

Huh? All I did was tear down some dilapidated houses and put up some new ones!

“Simply seeing the poor people of the slum quarter live in more elegant and beautiful residences than themselves is enough to make them go mad with fury. Preposterous, is it not? Such entitlement is idiocy. Those nobles care only about appearances, so you have hit them where it hurts the most. At least ten nobles were so upset that they keeled over, unconscious.”

Ten KOs already. Their stupidity evidently got them before I could. They’d short-circuited just out of resentment for the lower classes. Ten plus nobles, still out cold. Could be a good racket: I’d sell them some of my lowest quality mushrooms, inflame their resentment, knock ’em out again, and so on and so forth? *I see it now…* Once they got used to their current inferiority, I’d build a slum-quarter Kiyomizudera Temple. From that tall place, I’d have the slum quarter look down on them. We’d drop litter on their heads. That’d get their tempers riled and their fuses blown all over again. *Which equals more mushroom profits!* I was gonna be rich!

“Okay, I don’t get it, but thanks. Here—a thank-you manju.”

I gave him a manju to show my appreciation and went back to the souvenir shop. The girls had already finished with their baths. Next up was my beautiful, late-night, try-hard-not-to-get-hard endeavor. *That’s right—bra manufacturing!*

Today I was going to do three at once. Mean Girls B, C, and D. *Those mean girls are really hard to tell apart. They could’ve swapped positions and I doubt I would even notice it!* B, C, and D were completely impossible to tell apart!

I couldn't rely on their faces to tell them apart. Maybe their breasts would give me a vital clue. *This is going to drive my already super-negative teenage-boy sex appeal even deeper into the red,* I thought. I mean, only being able to tell girls apart by their boobs… *That'll knock my sex appeal completely off the radar!*

"All right, before we get started—don't bite my head off, 'kay? I'm too crunchy. You'll cut your mouth *and* my head, you got it? Normally, if someone is giving you a free bra while you're biting their head off, that'd be coerced labor, you know? Just my crunch-munch-hunch. Mean girl munch!"

"How many times do we have to tell you, we *don't bite!"* they shouted. "We've never even bitten anyone before! We're not mean girls, and we're not henchmen!"

Sheesh, they even spoke in unison. All of the mean girls were tall, with long limbs and pretty, doll-like faces. They coordinated their hairstyles and clothes with one another, right down to the little details. *And they definitely all bite!* It wasn't just hard to tell them apart, you could shuffle them up and then you'd fail to differentiate them ten times out of ten! Statistically improbable! I figured they'd be easier to tell apart without makeup, but even their bare faces were similar! It looked like they still had some basic makeup on, but just a little, so their vibe was just a little more different than usual. *Maybe I can stick some labels on them?*

And then…their chest sizes were exactly the same, too! If a doppelganger suddenly showed up, you'd literally have no way to tell which one was the fake. We'd have an outbreak of doppelganger bullies. That'd be a crisis.

Magic Hands fed me the real story. While the size was almost exactly the same, the firmness and stretchiness differed slightly. The shapes and heaviness also differed minutely.

Bra-making is quite an art, I thought. *An art with the potential to enrapture teenage boys like no other.* Why was I focusing on the deep mysteries of bra-craft above all else in this fantasy world? Would unlocking that mystery kill my sex appeal once and for all?

"Wah!"

“Eep!”

“Mmmf!”

They always said the same lines, so why were only their sounds different?! To figure out who’s who, would I need to use Magic Hands to measure their breasts every time?! I’d be arrested and executed as a pervert!

“Agh!”

“Aah!”

“Urrff!”

Aha! Mean Girl D’s groans were slightly longer. What a useless method of differentiation! And doing what it took to draw it out of her… *Yeah, that’s absolutely out of bounds!*

My mental state could hardly bear the strain of any more banter, but I had to be a hero:

“Miss Armor Rep, your hands aren’t even covering my eyes—they’re just covering my mouth now! You’re supposed to be blindfolding me, not gagging me. I can still see if you’re gagging me! Of course I can! It’d be pretty shocking if covering my mouth prevented me from seeing things! And I’m tired of railing on you about this!”

All right, I finished, but…apparently sometimes the, er, edges chafed. I tried changing the weave of the cloth, but it looked like this new fabric needed further development. A brassiere’s work was never done. *’Cause their “edges” are…my god, pointy!*

“Look, I’m starting the bottoms now, so *please* cover my eyes? That’s my nose. Come on, you know what you’re doing! You can’t mix up my nose and eyes! You should be able to tell by touching! Don’t stick your tongue out at me!”

There was no way to rein in a former Dungeon Emperor. To be honest, it was too late to blindfold me now. It was time for some serious twitching. I finished the bottoms, so please go home? Nope. Out of commission. *Twitch twitch twitch…*

I wonder how Slimey’s doing.

They collapsed and fainted in the same way, in the end. *I'll never be able to permanently differentiate them.* I mean, there was the slightest, subtlest difference in their spasms, but it felt weird to differentiate them based on their twitch attacks as well! All right, better put clothes on them…

DAY 67

MORNING

They're getting hugs, and sweets, and cash, but from old ladies—so I'm not jealous.

SOUVENIR SHOP

CAPITAL- FRONT BRANCH

WHAT TO DO? While I tried to devise a way to invade the capital, a base within the capital's walls had already been established. The castle was in our grasp. There was no need to even seize it anymore.

There was the capital fortress, but the Second Division commander let us stroll in. With the frontier army and the Imperial Guard occupied with the souvenir store, we could seize the capital and castle at our leisure.

"I guess if we seize the capital now, we won't be able to keep ripping off the Merchant Kingdom?"

Outside there was the army, and inside, twenty level 100+ girls. Oh, and the Dungeon Emperor. Yeah, this city was toast. The Kingdom and the second prince were totally trapped. But man, I wanted to keep ripping off the Merchant Kingdom. When they were tapped dry, that was when I'd seize the capital and leave the place to Mr. Meridad and Princess Girl to clean up. Until then, it was rip-off city. Nothing wrong with doing more economic damage to the Merchant Kingdom. *And we're doing a lot of damage!*

"Still, the first prince's army doesn't have the first prince attached… Isn't that just the church's old-god-dude fetish army? So I guess…old dude fetishists are on their way?"

The capital was already in danger, but if the fetishists met the fetish army…then they were truly screwed.

"Hang on, an army of old dude fetishists—that's terrifying! Run away, old dudes everywhere! I'll just call them the church-allied nobles

instead!”

Yeah, that was too terrifying to contemplate. It would take at least three days until the church-whatever-it’s-called army showed up. I could stick around here for about two more days, and if something slowed down the church, then I’d just get there early. I was all out of golems to piss them off, though.

Still, I couldn’t just leave Murimuri Castle undefended. Mr. Meridad’s army was here, but that barely counted. What to do with the capital?

“There aren’t any bookstores and the supplies haven’t circulated into the market yet. The souvenir store is pretty much a monopoly at the moment.”

The girls had bought up all of the good equipment they could get their hands on, but supposedly all of the clothes on offer were shoddy. The capital was pretty far behind the civilization of the frontier at this point. Everything sucked.

Now that I’d recruited the orphans to help with the (rip-off) sale at the Souvenir Shop Orphanage Branch Ya Know? Ya Feel?, I had a labor shortage in the shop. Those orphans were really popular. And with the exception of the nobles and merchants, the citizens of the capital had been swept up in a frontier craze.

“Those kids are *soooo* cute!”

When people heard that they could finally enter the slum quarter, which had been cordoned off by the nobles until now, a fountain of aid poured in. All the shopping housewives loved those orphans, wailing and weeping and hugging them, giving them sweets and tips. The kids looked a little bewildered by the attention.

The nobles had been profiting off of the people’s sympathy for the slum quarter. They’d been skimming aid off the top—no, more than that. Taking all of it for themselves. When Book Club President and the Arts Club girls found out, they’d lost it. They inflicted Nightmare, Illusion, and Suffer, and Bewilder, and Derange, and Pure Pain, and all sorts of other unpleasant gifts on the noble quarter. Yeah, you didn’t want to piss those chicks off. Without special resistance, you’d get sent to a real-life hell!

The nobles were our enemies. But what about the royals? That was what I needed to find out and why we were having this meeting. The old prince dude was obnoxious, so we left him out of it. *Why do I feel something like pity for him? 'Cause we're both loners now?*

The second prince did whatever the Merchant Kingdom said, so maybe we could put him in a monkey cage in the zoo alongside the pig of the first prince. The real problem were princes number three through five. *Maybe I should off this Don Juan of a king first? He's just mocking the rest of us with his five wives!*

"No wonder my sex appeal is struggling! This society is too hierarchical. The weak teenage boys never get to meet lovely ladies and must suffer day and night in the company of withered old geezers. To a teenage boy, hogging five chicks to himself is an unforgiveable sin. It's worthy of capital punishment!"

"So the first prince is dead, and the second prince has been pulled into the schemes of the great houses…now we must deal with three more."

Couldn't we just put Princess Girl in charge? No need to get her on the same page as us—she was there. In order to save the kingdom, she needed to destroy it. In order to preserve the kingdom, it needed to die.

She had the necessary conviction. The orphans loved her. She played with them, hugged them with tears streaming down her face. I felt a little worried that she hugged the female orphans and not the boys, but I couldn't worry about that now. Or maybe I should report her to the authorities? For suspicious behavior?

Then there was the old prince dude. Who knew what his deal was, but because of the whole old-dude-to-old-dude connection, I could let Mr. Meridad deal with him. I guess he was just waddling around trying to sacrifice his worthless life for the sake of the kingdom and stuff?

"Seriously, what's up with him?"

Per Stalker Girl's clan's info, the third through fifth princes didn't have any particular connections to foreign countries or the great houses through their mother's side. There was no deep story to uncover there, I assumed. Plus, they were all so young. The real thing to look into—who was educating them? Who had their ears? Plus, the fifth prince was Princess

Girl's brother by blood, and with his muscle-headed sister's genetics, he'd probably grow up into a charge-without-thinking type. Not a bad guy, necessarily. Just keep him away from Mr. Meridad's instructions. Talk about a bad combination! What would he even learn?!

The biggest problem, then, was the gigolo king over here. He had succumbed to a terrible illness that resulted in the other nations flocking here like vultures, leading to the near-ruin of his kingdom. Which meant that he had been governing a complete mess. Despite the joy of *five wives?!*

"All I can do is make requests. I understand your plans are beyond my comprehension."

Here were our choices, then: heal that pimpin' king or rebuild a new kingdom. We were guiding history here, so I couldn't let my emotions get in the way. I needed to use objective, clear-headed, truthful, big-brained judgments. The king was kind of an impressive guy; he had successfully wrangled the conflict with the nobles and he had attempted to help the slum quarter. The poverty of his kingdom was mainly because of the Theocracy and the Merchant Kingdoms' influences. He recognized the Beast Kingdom as a nation. He was hardly a bad guy. He couldn't do much to stop the Theocracy and Merchant Kingdom, that was all. He maintained pride in his nation despite a completely rigged economic game, despite the colluding of foreign powers and the money-worshipping nobles chipping away at his every policy. He was unable to allocate aid budget to the frontier, so he even sold royal treasures in order to send what little support he could. Beyond that, his hands were tied. Then one day…he suddenly fell ill.

After that, everything spiraled out of control.

"His intentions were noble, but he made too many enemies. There's no doubt that the economic blockade severely weakened the kingdom," I said. "And I can't help but wonder about his leniency. Not executing a single one of the nobles, even after all that blatant treachery? And *five* wives?"

"Is that not normal for a king?"

No, dispel those personal jealousies! I had to be fair and objective, and make a decision accordingly. But I mean, *five* wives?! *I guess pimpin' kings are gonna pimp. The bigger they pimp, the harder they fall.* …Oh no.

Don’t tell me that if I healed him, he’d be all “Let’s gooo, baby! Bow chicka wow!”

“Yup, he’s an old dude and has five wives—he’s a bad egg. Definitely bad, I know that. That is my completely objective, unbiased, fair, and neutral judgment. He’s a pimp king, for god’s sake!”

“Uh, Haruka, about that… He’s not a pimp,” offered Mr. Meridad. “He’s just a king. When I was unable to leave the frontier, when I had no other allies in the capital, he always kept the word of the royal family and sent what little aid he could. He loves his people, although yes, he may be a bit quick-tempered. He fought with the nobles, the great houses, the Theocracy, and the Merchant Kingdom, but he did his best. He’s got talent, and he’s sharp as a knife. Quick to snap, but gentle at heart. He has deep, unrestrained feelings, but he can analyze situations well. And I suppose he was always a Don Juan…but he’s a good man at heart.”

“So he *was* pimping the whole time!”

Yup, time to burn the party down, nobles and kings alike. Burn them to ashes and charcoal. Leave no hope of regeneration.

“My father is a wonderful king,” Princess Girl said. “Please. If you can save him, I will devote my life to you, dear Haruka. Without my father, our kingdom cannot be saved. With the king back, Diorelle shall surpass the great kingdoms of old—we can create the greatest kingdom in history! He fell ill halfway through his reign, so please…save the king. Save my father!”

“Haruka, I too believe this is the best course,” said Mr. Meridad. “I know I am in no position to ask anything of you—you saved our domain when it was on the brink of collapse. I know how powerless I am. But still, I beg you. I will do anything in my power. I will invade the Theocracy and Merchant Kingdom if need be. Tell me what to do! Lord Haruka, save my friend’s life!”

Was that majority rule in favor of the pimpin’ king? No! A majority rules in democracy, and there were still twenty-one girls yet to vote.

“Haruka-kun, if they want it that badly, then why don’t you help them?” Class Rep said.

“Yeah, and if it goes poorly, we can always reconsider,” the others chimed in.

Even the girls sided with him? *What frightening ladykilling power…* Reviving this pimpin’ king could start some wild parties.

I needed to make my case. Princess Girl was his daughter, and Mr. Meridad his friend. And the girls agreed because they felt sorry for them, so there wasn’t a vote in the room that wasn’t clouded by bias. Their eyes were totally closed to the prospective problems.

“You’re all letting your personal feelings get in the way of your decision,” I warned. “The fate of the kingdom depends on the king. It’s not about if you like him, but about having the political, economic, and military judgment to deal with the present circumstances. You’re all closing your eyes and looking away and blinding yourself and all the various eye metaphors to the issue here! *The man has five goddamn wives!* That makes me so hot under the collar that I’m ready to shoot meteorites! Five, *five,* are you kidding me?!”

“Uh, that’s entirely *your* personal grudge?”

“Yup, not a hint of logic.”

Huh? They had started to lecture me. Clearly they didn’t understand the stakes here.

“J-just pretend that this country had a population of entirely teenage boys. Having five wives in that scenario would be a capital crime! That’s enough to make our heads explode, to make us flood the earth with tears!”

“What the hell kind of country is that?!”

I didn’t expect sending the nerdaroonies elsewhere to backfire on me like this. I was the only teenage boy here! Foes on all four sides! Foes… food? Some fast food *would* be nice, but I needed to get my milk products in line for that. Starting with cheese and cream. I could really use some pizza. And sausage? How the heck was salami made, anyhow? Ooh, or some Japanese soul food, like miso or tofu, and then seafood to follow up. I had soy sauce, so making miso had to be possible. Once I had all those things, I could start up a tradition of Japanese cooking here. *And then…*

“You were supposed to be mad. How come you’re muttering on about the ingredients for miso soup?! While you’re thinking about that, figure out wheat too, ’kay?”

Wheat, huh? I was leaning toward *suimono* soup, just soy and a perfectly clear fish stock simmered to perfection with a little sprig of somethin’ somethin’, ya know, to jazz it up, but she had a point. I’d need to find wheat, but now that gluten-based sweets had been brought to my attention, I couldn’t justify putting them on the back burner.

“We’re not talking about *suimono*, we’re talking about the king!”

“We’re lecturing you about the fate of this country, and you’re waffling over miso soup?!”

“Huh? Oh yeah, I forgot. I mean, I kinda remember something like that from a long time ago, but who cares? What about putting noodles into miso soup?”

“Cut the miso soup crap!”

“The king, we’re talking about the king!”

We’re talking about how to make the king abdicate, right? Well that’s just a question of whether to burn or bonk. Burn, obviously! Well, he is Princess Girl’s dad, so I’d feel bad for her…but yeah, I’mma still burn him?

That pimpin’ harem king with his five wives! Yeah, he seriously pissed me off. And if that guy, the king, made Princess Girl, then dang, that playgirl queen must have some marvelous legs and back, and a serious chest to boot. I mean, I was glad he had at least *one* wife. Two? Sure, fine, he was a king. Didn’t mean I was less pissed off. *Fine. I’ll heal him. Then I’ll burn him.*

“Thank you very—what?”

“Don’t worry, if he tries to burn the king we’ll bonk him,” Class Rep said.

No, no, I couldn’t. Not now. It was still too soon. For now, I gave him a healing antitoxin potion to prevent his condition from worsening, and then a mushroom potion to help him regain his strength, and then a toxin-proof healing-effect (small) mushroom.

We still had a long way to go with the Merchant Kingdom. Once that was done with, there was more on the agenda. I needed to wound them deeper, carve such a deep and deadly wound that they'd never get out. I wouldn't be able to wheedle out every last penny from the Merchant Kingdom and noble shitheads if I didn't change tactics. I wanted to take it all. I wanted it so I could spend it all in a fantastic, fantastical, fantasy-land shopping spree in a late-night, big-city establishment! Big bucks for a big city lifestyle! Yes, I had to become richer!

Greed is good, I thought. *Ripping off is right.* That was my message to the Merchant Kingdom.

DAY 67

I'm supposed to be a shut-in but I've totally abandoned my residence.

BEAST KINGDOM

JUNGLE

WE BURNED THE filthy beast village to the ground, then captured the beasts as they fled from the flames. A simple, fundamental method of beast hunting.

"Kill them if you need to, just don't let them escape!"

"Stop your screaming, vile beastfolk!"

If we could capture a young female brat, then the men would come after her in a crazed fury and fall right into our trap. They resembled humans, but their hearts were beastly. They came running into our traps to die like the brainless animals that they were.

The adult males didn't sell for much anyways. They were welcome to die all they liked.

"Discard their weapons. For every male that runs, kill a young female."

"Put the chains on them. We can't kill them once they're wearing them, but they'll be dead soon enough. Hurry up!"

Seriously. First the tanuki tribe, and then the boar tribe. All of them low value. I came all this way into this foul-smelling forest to hunt beasts, and not a single prize among them.

"You know where the other villages are, don't you? Tell us! If you give us the location of a rabbit, wolf, or fox village, I'll spare one of you."

No response, eh? Beastfolk were all worthless trash in the end. They didn't have the brains to do what was best for them.

“For every three beast village locations, we’ll set one of you free. Whoever tells us first. Hurry up!”

Worthless. I just had to keep them alive until we sold them. We’d done our best to torture them without leaving marks, but even then the dumb beasts just started retching in the end. Naturally, we never *actually* set any of them free. It was just a matter of who we would sell them to afterward.

“Why are there so few of ’em? Don’t tell me they got themselves killed?”

“They could have slipped by us. Damn, and there are so many young females here!”

The dangerous beast tribes like wolves and bears were handled by a squadron, while we found nothing but duds. I couldn’t make a living on these! If I could get my hands on some foxes or rabbits, I’d live in luxury for the rest of my days. These were barely worth keeping alive. What bullshit.

“Why aren’t our scouts back?”

“Don’t tell me they’re off playing with some females.”

“We gotta hurry up or we’ll never make a damn profit.”

Didn’t they realize that now, with the kingdom paralyzed, was the perfect opportunity?! If we didn’t hurry up, the church would get involved and try to start stealing our slaves.

“We’ve just gotta round up a bunch of ’em. Whatta pain.”

“Just load up on as many cheap ones as possible.”

“That’s hunting for ya…”

I ain’t gonna have enough left to drink on after paying back those loans.

“We gotta lock up the groups. Think our watch isn’t taking this seriously enough.”

Divide and conquer, capture whatever we find. Why was I getting a bad feeling about this hunt? The forest felt quiet. Something was off. And damn, those beasts sure screamed and squealed up a storm. We set the forest

on fire with some magic, which finally caused things to quiet down. *They don't sell for as much when they're burned, but they're just so noisy. Those dumb animals.*

"We gotta cut down on the loans. And for god's sake, keep an eye on the guy with the Charm Bell."

"Aye aye."

"You're too worried, boss. We're not gonna run into any beastfolk armies over here."

I wish we had proper magic items, but the damn church had a monopoly on those, leaving us merchants to suffer. *Still—isn't it a bit too quiet?*

Then further along…another brat? No, an adult. Young, apparently female, probably not worth much. What tribe was she from? I couldn't see the ears because of her hood.

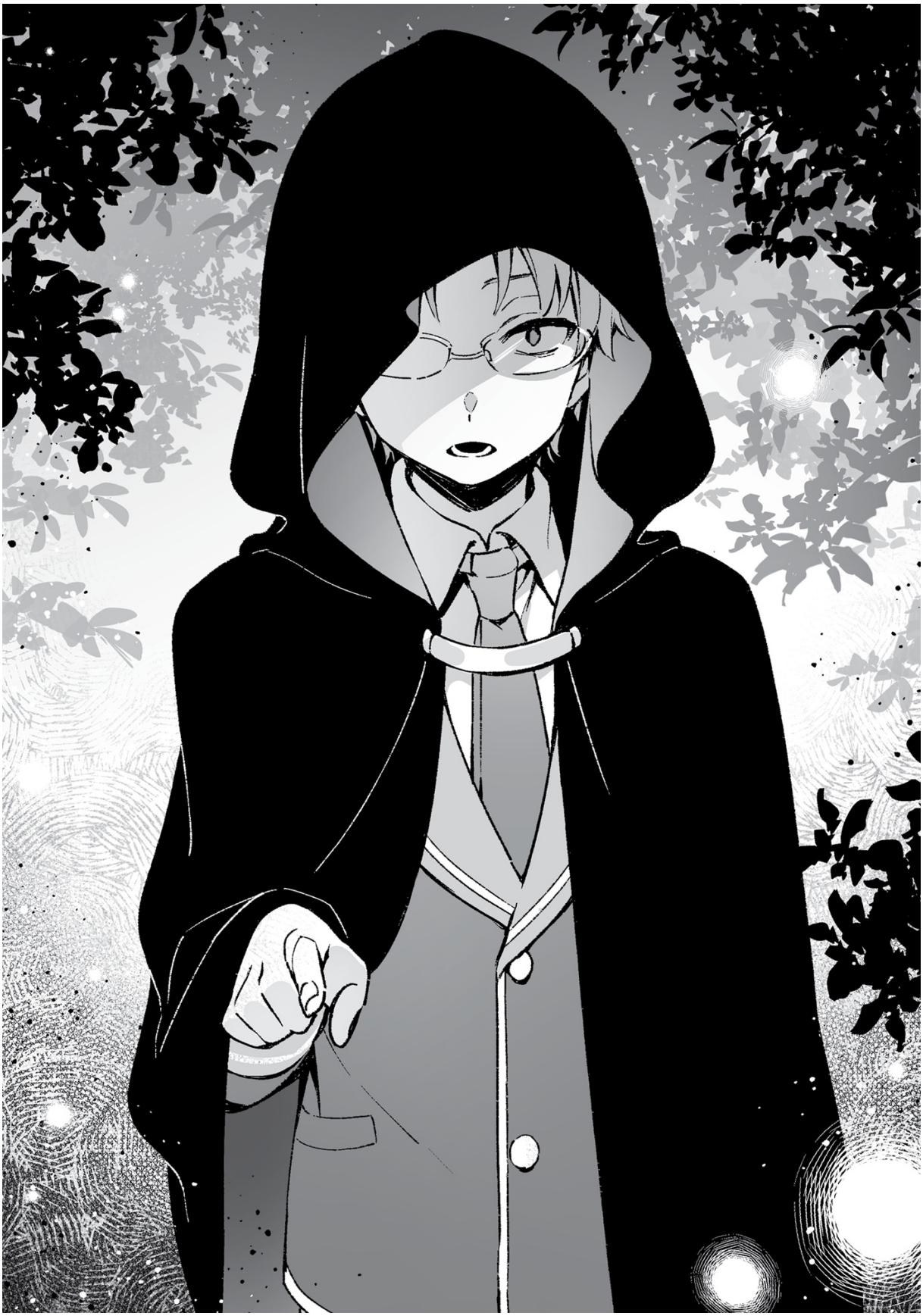
"Don't move. If you do, we'll kill you."

"I'm not running away," it replied. "Not after coming this far. You see, I've always longed to come to a fantasy world. And here I am. I'm not going to run away."

A lunatic, huh? Did they speak human language? *Probably can't sell 'em for jack shit… Let's kill it.*

"Hey, where's your village? Where are your little friends? Tell us and I'll let you live."

"My companions are spread throughout the forest. But you won't be going to any village today. There's nowhere left to go."



What the hell was this crazy talk? *All right, let's just kill this lunatic and get on to the next.*

I readied my sword and approached. The creature didn't even move. I guess it was too scared or something. I put my sword to its throat and… huh?

"Those beastfolk didn't stop fighting. They knew it was a trap. But they wanted to save their people."

What is—*shink.*

***

It was a monster.

I was just screwing around. Just an easy little slave-hunting expedition, and suddenly, my buddies were dead. Their bodies got ripped to shreds like they were made of paper, like they were nothing. I couldn't see what did it.

"Wh-what's happening?!"

One after the other, they froze in place, possessed by something invisible, and then they got ripped apart from the inside out. *Shit! The females must have attracted this thing with their pathetic squealing! I should've killed them all!*

"Aaaaaaaaagh!"

"Gwaaah! M-my legs!"

All my slave hunters had skill-equipped armor, but something was tearing through it. Even our vanguard of former A-class adventurers were now a pile of meat. No skill could do this. This was a pure monster!

"How could you do this?! Why are you killing us?! We didn't do *nothing* to you! You murderer!" I screamed.

Without enough beastfolk slaves for sale, it was cheaper to come here to enjoy ourselves rather than actually buy them. We were only having a laugh! It wasn't worth killing over!

“S-stop s-screwing around! Y-y-you’re h-human, aren’t you? Don’t side with the beasts! I-I’m human, like you! Don’t kill me! Why would you?!”

“Yes, I may be human,” the monster replied. “But I only hate other humans. I have no grudge against the beastfolk, but plenty against humans. So…die.”

Ack—why—why… Something was inside of my body!

“You enjoyed yourself, huh? Killing and causing pain and suffering? Then have a taste of it for yourself. Feel pain. Suffer. Now, die.”

Why is this—?!

Splurt.

***

He wasn’t one of the beastfolk. But the kingdom should be in civil war, in a state of disarray. How were there already new forces opposing the Theocracy?

“We are from the Merchant Alliance,” I shouted. “We have a rearguard and a main force on the way. If you lay a hand on us, they will become your enemy. Are you picking a fight with the Merchant Kingdom?!”

The figure sighed. “The trailing force and main force are long gone. I’ve never fought before, but I’m thinking about picking a fight now, yeah.”

Where did he come from? I didn’t sense his presence, and while there should’ve been Merchant Kingdom slave-hunting squads all around us, why—no, *how* did he get here?!

He vanished!

“W-wait! Very well, we’ll hand over half of the slaves! A compromise! And in exchange, let us finish our hunt uninterrupted!”

He vanished and then reappeared in a near instant, and suddenly several more of my men were dead. I could run, but where were my

soldiers?! I drew my effect-endowed blade. A sword that never failed to find its target.

"Surround him! Don't scatter!"

No response?

"There's nobody left to obey you. Goodbye."

The moment I heard the voice behind me, I swung my sword. But my Perfect Aim skill…was gone? Ah!

Thump.

***

We gathered and shared information. We weren't invincible. We were not mighty warriors. So we pooled information and confirmed the situation.

"Squadrons A-2 through C-5 have been taken out. Not a single survivor. But the villages are safe."

"We got all the way to D-3—the four villages sustained no damage. We didn't make it to A-6 in time. The village was burned and the people killed."

"E-7 had captured the tanuki beastfolk, but they've all been freed now. And the monkey village was no good. The villages under attack by the E squadrons are safe."

"All of the beastfolk captured by Squadron B have been freed. We have soldiers in that direction. Those were the troops heading to confront the beastfolk's armed forces."

We achieved all of our objectives. We made it to the villages in time. We saved the beastfolk. And the enemy…we killed them all. Together, we killed them. It was a lot easier than expected, to be honest. We hated them, after all, and the beastfolk that they killed had suffered far, far worse.

"That was unexpectedly smooth, right?"

"And they like us, too."

Haruka-kun had been the one who killed for all of our sakes up until now. Watching him go through that wasn't smooth. That hadn't been easy. That was why I didn't feel anything, killing all those soldiers. I took one look at them kicking the beastfolk corpses, and then I let my rage take the rest from there.

Haruka-kun said that Kakizaki-kun's group would act that way, but in the end, we were no different. As for Haruka-kun himself… He had no choice but to kill, and here we were, killing, too. Maybe killing was only natural in a fantasy world, and Haruka-kun had no choice but to become a killer. But I think maybe he hated it more than anybody.

"Let's meet up with Kakizaki-kun's group."

"Yeah, not that they need our help. We can hunt down anyone trying to escape."

The Merchant Kingdom troops should have been wiped out at this point. The experienced, veteran troops who darted into endless danger—all of them, torn apart.

The famous Japanese national-team-level athletes had become berserkers, just like Haruka-kun said they would.

The moment our pirate ship made contact, it was already over. The battle, and their lives. They called themselves innocent merchant vessels, but in reality they were pirate ships attacking other defenseless traders. The merchants doubled as pirates. But those expert pirate mercenaries were destroyed in the blink of an eye. Instantly, definitively destroyed. Efficiently, utterly annihilated.

So long as they were a team, the five of them were the strongest, no matter the enemy's numbers. If we were in the forest and happened to encounter an enemy, even Class Rep and the other girls wouldn't be able to keep up. Our group would just get in the way.

I barely sensed any trace of life in the direction of the mercenaries. Or should I say ex-mercenaries? Kakizaki-kun and the others must've already hunted every last one of them.

"Let's just try to save as many beastfolk as we can for now," I said.

"Got it."

The sounds faded. Those warriors loved fighting with their lives on the line, giving their all on the battlefield. They didn't need a reason or a sense of justice to fight—fighting itself was their life purpose. Those berserkers who'd struggled in a world without battle were now unleashed in the jungles of a fantasy world. Those mercenaries paid with their lives. That's why their presences were vanishing. The only troop remaining was the main force of the Merchant Kingdom.

"So they kill beastfolk and beast warriors?"

"Yes. They're an extermination force with magic and skills and items specifically engineered to kill beastfolk," I said. "They're truly dangerous. Is it really okay to let Slimey handle them all?"

"I think that's the only part we *don't* need to worry about!"

Yeah, the others were right. That adorable, jiggly slime was no less of a monster than Haruka-kun or Angelica-san. *He is cute, though.*

***

The jungle was too quiet. We'd encountered a slime, the weakest of all monsters. In fact, slimes were so weak it was strange to encounter one—usually they got devoured the moment they were born. But this was what slimes looked like, or so I'd heard. Rare, but there was no reason to hunt it, so we let it be and continued to advance.

"Another? There's a lot of them, aren't there?"

Is there a slime outbreak? There was another slime when we reached our destination. Still, slimes were nothing to fear, so we hurried on. But ahead, in the distance—slimes? Thousands of them, as far as the eye could see.

I started to feel a prickle of anxiety.

"Is this a slime stampede? We should burn them with magic!"

"Unite your magic and unleash it at once. Surround them with flames."

We couldn't ignore them in these sheer numbers. Even slimes would be dangerous if they charged as a group. A stampede of this many slimes would overrun the entire jungle. The trees would be buried in a sea of slimes.

Our main division consisted of six regiments, smaller forces that created a large one. But in the chaos of the slimes, the large force shattered into the smaller ones. We were surrounded—split into groups of about three thousand soldiers each, encircled by slimes.

"Guard the flank! Defensive maneuvers! You mages, cut down their numbers with magic!"

"Spray poison, downwind for now! There are too many of them!"

"Th-they started to move! Our magic—it's getting devoured!"

"Our monster-killing weapons are ineffective! They're even eating the flames!"

Our magic squadrons' attacks were having no effect, and arrows and spears were equally useless. Slimes were supposed to be the weakest monsters of all, barely more corporeal than shadows…but we'd been surrounded by them, with no place to run. *They're supposed to be useless!*

"None of the items are working. The poison has no effect, either."

"Shit, is this a group of mutants? Break through and make a run for it. This many…they're eating us!"

This was a force of the Merchant Kingdom's elite soldiers and adventurers. The ultimate force for countering the beastfolk army. But that very force was getting devoured by successive waves of slimes. Escape was the only option at this point.

I couldn't save my companions, but I could run for it. I'd spent my whole life killing monsters straight from hell. I was an S-rank adventurer; I had commanded whole armies. Even my equipment was peerless.

But in the face of this overwhelming stampede, when I tried to escape…they were leading me somewhere? I couldn't sense anything behind me. All of them, dead already?! And before me, a single slime.

Just one slime.

No. I was an S-class adventurer. I had trained my body, joined the army, learned the art of killing. Used the money I made to buy equipment with special skills. From my years of fighting, from all my accumulated experience, I could tell: this thing was strong.

"Hm. This is only the second time a monster has frightened me."

It hadn't happened since that one Dungeon King. I lost all of my buddies in that battle and stopped adventuring altogether afterward. It was hard to imagine a stronger monster than that one. I supposed this was bound to happen sooner or later. I let alcohol weaken my body, joined the army after drowning in debt. I'd killed countless innocents in my long years.

"I need to kill this thing, eh?"

Jiggle jiggle.

I'm going to die.

Then let this be my final deed, I decided. I took out the medicine I had hidden in the back of my sleeve pocket. I drank it.

This elixir had a dark history. If used incorrectly, it would shorten your lifespan and cause adverse effects for the rest of your life. But in exchange, you temporarily received a massive boost to your stats. It didn't last long, but supposedly it increased your stats more than tenfold. I had to go all in, kill it, and run.

"*Hrraaaaaa!* Take that!"

I had lived my life by the blade. In this brutal world, the world that had taken so many friends from me, this blade was the sole ally I had left.

"And my last opponent is a slime."

Let's call it divine punishment. I killed a Dungeon King and was celebrated as a hero. I couldn't protect my beloved friends, and yet I was treated as a hero. Even though all of them died. What madness! What darkness I'd lived through. Now came the end. At last, it was all over. One thing was certain: my soul was too stained to join my friends. From beginning to end, all I had was the sword. I'd lost everything else that day.

I readied my weapon.

The slime jiggled its plump, round body as it bounced around, growing larger at the sides. Were those limbs? It was taking a human shape!

"Y-you're a person…?"

It may have resembled a person, but no—this was too beautiful to be a real person.

…

My sword! My sword trembled. My last fight. In the last moments of my pathetic life, I saw a blindingly beautiful sword goddess, swinging a blade beyond the limits of humanity. Before I lost everything, I saw at last what true beauty was. The sword stroke of my dreams.

***

We met up and used Enemy Detection on our surroundings. There was no enemy presence nearby. The beastfolk were on guard too. *Of course…beast ears!*

We gathered the corpses of the fallen and dug holes. All that remained was to bury them. We marked the graves with simple stones. They must've hated the idea of getting buried using human customs. It was no wonder that they hated us.

They put their hands together and bowed. A prayer that they may have happiness in the next life. At least we'd managed to weaken the Merchant Kingdom. They'd been a force to rival the Diorelle army. They were well-led, too.

The four of us handled the ancillary squadrons sent out to the beastfolk villages, but even they were high level. They had good equipment buffed with skills as well. With an army of soldiers like that wiped out, that would be a major blow to the Merchant Kingdom's strength. They had more than five thousand soldiers. Well, not anymore.

"We didn't make it in time."

"It took us too long to take out the reinforcements from the river."

The beastfolk warriors gave their lives to protect their people. That was why there were still surviving villages, and how the slaves had managed to escape in time. And…they got their revenge. At last, the Beast Kingdom was safe from invasion.

Jiggle jiggle!

Humans were no longer welcome here. They were on guard, fiercely watching the perimeter. Their villages were burned, their friends dead—there was no way they could ever trust humans again. We were too late on that account too.

We'd made it all the way to a fantasy world, but we wouldn't get to experience beast ears for ourselves. *Let's go home*.

"Kakizaki-kun, you guys good to go?"

"Yeah."

We clasped our palms together and started to walk toward Diorelle. After their homes were burned, the proud men of the villages rushed into the enemy traps and died, all to try to save the captured girls.

They were nothing like us. We'd always lived hiding, running, and trembling. The beastfolk warriors were prepared to die to protect their families. That was courage—something we didn't have. We made excuses for ourselves—that it was reckless, that it was meaningless. But in the end, we simply lacked that bravery.

That was all over now. I used to mock reckless courage, sneer at it. Today, though, I snapped. I lost myself in rage. In the midst of it, nothing else mattered. I couldn't forgive those soldiers. So I killed them—we killed them all.

At last, I understood. I used to get stronger to protect myself from things that I feared. I thought that cheat skills were meant to protect the weak. That wasn't what fueled them at all. It was my anger, my hatred… pure black, unending misery. These skills weren't meant to protect. They were built for rage.

Let's go home. This was what it took to survive in this world. My classmates were waiting for me.

Jiggle jiggle.

Ever since getting here, we never had a place where we belonged. But now, at least, we had created a home and kept it safe.

DAY 67

NOON

If all news is bad news, then no news is good news, so if I'm always a loner it'll always be good news!

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

IN THE SOUVENIR SHOP operations room, I wound the elaborate conveyor belts of products through the air, whirling completed products down to place them neatly on the shelves.

They say in *Slam Dunk* that you need to have self-control to grab rebounds, and the girls exhibited a lack of that: they bought up over half of the manju I made. I could never make enough manju. I produced it to make up for the orphans' nutrition deficit, and the girls must've wanted to make sure the kids got their fill.

"Well, I know that children can't be eating that many manju, and grabbing manju off the shelf isn't exactly the same as grabbing rebounds, so why don't y'all bring that same tenaciousness to your post-manju workouts? And thanks for your patronage!"

"Hey, Big Bro, I've got a message! Only a few pennants left, but we don't need any mushroom-shaped ones!"

One of the orphans delivered a message. I patted his head and thanked him with a smile, then he ran back into the shop. The "I ❤ FRONTIER" series was the real hit after all! It sold surprisingly well. It was our main staple, in fact! Why didn't the mushroom-shaped pennants sell, though?

"Is it that pennants are supposed to be triangle-shaped so a mushroom-shaped pennant just gets in the way?"

Yeah, I did remember feeling something unorthodox about it back when I first made the design. What could it be? And wasn't this supposed to

be a plan to squeeze money out of the nobles and the Merchant Kingdom until they suffered unsustainable losses? Why was I so busy managing a legitimate business?

"We're out of one-piece dresses and long skirts!"

"And we're almost out of shoes and bags, too!"

"No more pots or frying pans! Make them faster!"

Because the orphans and the girls were wearing uniforms, apparently a girls' uniform fad had swept the capital. Fortunately it was a simple, mass-producible design: a plain long skirt and then a blouse, vest, and jacket. Sales for boleros were going crazy.

Combining the skirt and the bolero guaranteed ceaseless additional orders. They had money in the capital, but a shortage of wares for sale. The demand was endless.

The Mean Girls were also sketching new designs targeted at the tastes of mature women, but the people here bought up literally anything we put on the shelves. High-speed mass production and the Mean Girls' designs still couldn't hold a candle to the indomitable spirit of a housewife.

"We need more belts! Fast!"

"And buckets and brooms!"

"We're out of 'I ❤ FRONTIER' baseball caps!"

"Running low on keyholders on the right shelf too, pick it up, Haruka-kun!"

Unlike the frontier, the men of the capital also did their share of shopping. They came to the register, arms laden with clothing. The line practically snaked through the entire store. I doubted it had *nothing* to do with the fact that the girl's uniform was like those cute Anna Millers' waitress dresses?

Meanwhile, I set my prices sky-high for the nobles. They were probably close to bankruptcy after I sold them all those gaudy, flimsy dresses and the like, auction-house style, one after the next. They wanted to do the conspicuous consumption thing, show off for all their friends. Clothes, underwear, accessories. Furniture, art, jewelry, anything flashy and excessive and ornamental, they went crazy for.

With a single piece of clothing sold to one of those nobles, I could feed the orphans for a month. Just one of the premium items was enough to buy warm blankets for all of them. Those items went *flying* off the shelves. All of this scamming was for a cause. Everything that was stolen from the orphans was getting paid back to them at 1000 percent interest.

"Yeah, this is an inflation-powered, high-interest-rate rip-off loan repayment on damages. Take everything those nobles have!"

"On it!" the girls shouted.

It went without saying, but if one noble bought something, the rest *had* to have it too. So they kept on buying.

They really believed that they could buy status. That's why I could rip them off on any useless, shiny thing. The more expensive, the more they sold. I tried picking up some gravel off the street, polishing them up, and selling them at absurd prices as "Philosopher's Stones." They sold out in a flash. *I don't even need to try trolling them. They're too eager to fall for it!*

"I'm gonna go restock now. Once our stores are full again, let's work like it's a workout! I've got leotards for that, but interacting with customers in leotards could be a bit sketchy and possibly break some triple-X adult entertainment laws, so I'll BRB and stuff? I remember how to get to the castle! I'm just gonna have some fun on my way there, and I'll be back soon! So don't go looking for me! Ya know?"

"We don't care, just go and come back!"

"Hurry up, for god's sake!"

"We're dying over here! You're dead out of stock! Cut the triple-X bullcrap!"

"Hurry! Hurry!"

Hurry? Harry? Hurry Potter, you mean? Ain't that a kids' series? No need to get triple-X on those wacky wizards, I get in enough trouble as it is! Anyway, they were all glaring at me now, so I decided to hurry. I'd already restocked ten times today! I'd been running my poor tail off! When I went to the castle to restock…the floor plan had changed. Where were the goods this time?

“They changed the warehouse location again? If you’re gonna change it, do me a favor and *tell* me next time! You’re really giving me extra work over here. Think of all my poor victims, waiting in line, empty handed! Ugh, like, they’re still unloading the goods from the ships! Are you gonna make me take another step to get the goods? Another step on the road to rip-offs, a march, a rip-a-rap-a-rat-a-tat-tat! Okay, that sounds loud. But profitable?”

Nod nod.

She wasn’t even wearing armor now, but she was still the strong and silent type.

“Okay, wheat and oil…nice, they’ve got spinach this time! What have my Consulting abilities been up to this whole time, anyway? I don’t think I’ve been consulted about a single damn thing this entire time?”

I dumped it all into my item bag. There was no proper registry in this world, so I didn’t know the exact population, but I estimated that there were tens of thousands of people in this city. Which meant that they were sending at least enough food supplies for ten thousand people every day. On top of that, they were sending equipment and cash to buy up spellstones for the army. I snapped that up as well. They must’ve caught on by now, right? They should make a move soon. There was no way they’d let this continue.

“But nothing’s happened yet. Whatever will they do?”

My Trap Ring didn’t activate, so I didn’t know if there’d be a trap or not. Patrols couldn’t enter the area because of the Ultimate Lock’s effect. I supposed I could just keep trying to provoke them to send sexy female assassins after me. ’Cause I still hadn’t seen any! Anyway, I steadily snuck and simply snatched the stock, then returned with my beautiful bounty.

“Oh, they put paralyzing poison in the fish? Trying to fiendishly fish us out, eh? Shall I gift these to some poor lords?”

Nod nod.

Before long, the noble quarter was in chaos.

“I’m back. Mass shipments have been swiped, pasta with spinach and pork-like meat is for dinner tonight, and I’m in the midst of revelatory research involving Japanese spinach salad? Selling spinach by the seashore

sounds seriously supercalifragilisticexpialidocious? It is super and not cali and possibly fragile and extra docious? I'll keep it short, it's not atrocious."

"That wasn't short!"

"Don't tell me you're *Mary Poppins*?!"

"Spinach salad sounds good, so please, no more expialidocious. *Mary Poppins*? I don't even know how to make fun of you for this."

I didn't even get to sing the full song before they started cutting me off. Trying to lecture someone for um-diddle-diddle um-diddle-aye! That's just unnecessary glaring, don't you think? Why were they mad at me?

"I get it, teenage girls have a love-hate relationship with *Mary Poppins* so you can't stand the song. Sheesh, I've memorized the full thing, I figured you guys would appreciate it!"

"You remember the song lyrics but not our damn names?!"

"Well, I always forget the diddly-diddle-dum part, but the chorus is what really matters, ya know?"

"I'm pretty sure you could fit all of our names into supercalifragilisticexpialidocious alone!"

For some reason, the song writers hadn't bothered to put all of my classmates' names into the lyrics of the song. But if they had…*this fantasy world would suffer from an outbreak of musicals!* Not that I could even go to the theater. *I'm a shut-in, see?*

"How'd it go?"

"Yeah, so they, like, kept changing the warehouse location and probably put traps there? Not that I was there!"

"Given that you've managed to come back without triggering the Eternal Trap, you'd think that you would've at least *noticed* whether or not there was a trap!"

To be fair, a plain, old physical trap without a magic trigger was still plenty dangerous. I did have my Trap Sensing skill for that, though. Regardless, they definitely set traps. They had to have a spare magic item or secret weapon of some sort. Whatevs, I'd snatch up any spare magic items I could find, and slice apart any secret weapon the moment it appeared,

unless it was a sexy female assassin of course! *I have the perfect plan for how to deal with that!*

That was the only measure left to them—to send a sexy female assassin. How could there be anything else? They needed to set up a dangerous adult trap in the warehouse of delicately stored sexy female assassins to attack me, seduce me, and ensnare me! *I won't settle for less!* Should I go back one more time, just to check?

"Lord Haruka. We have a message from Captain Terisel of the Second Division. The wondrous magic swordfighter known as the Merchant's Demon Blade, Vizmuregzero, has arrived in the castle. He asks that you please be careful."

I swung around. "S-s-s-s-s-s-say *what*? Stevie Wondersword of the Stardust Crusades is gonna slurpity-slurp cherry-stem tongue-twist *rerorerorero* babes all over the castle?! That's harassment! Should we alert the authorities?"

"Why is his brain empty except for *Mary Poppins* lyrics?"

But even if I did report this to the Second Division, they were the ones alerting me about him (or her…?) in the first place! Look, I'm not saying that that cherry-lickin' Stevie Wondersword *didn't* give me some good ideas, but we'd need babes around first. Otherwise, I could hardly get in the *rerorero* mood.

Most importantly—the Merchant Kingdom was finally making a move, huh? But I would stay strong! I wouldn't give in to my *rerorerorero* urges!

"Heh! It helps I already blew off some steam. Last night, Miss Armor Rep's see-through chemise revealed her lush, beguiling, naked skin, the exposed parts of which I licked and sucked from her toes moving upward, slowly wetting those trembling thighs until my tongue reached paradise itself—"

Miss Armor Aphrodite was as red as Venus. She was attacking me with the morning star?!

"B-but I put a sticker on the morning star! It said, 'Off Limits'—wait, is that a sickle-and-chain?!"

A huge one!

“D-don’t tell me…the nobles sold it to us?”

Nod nod.

Why did the nobles of this country have giant sickle-and-chains for combat?

“It even has skills, but you bargained it down to a cheap price? Mwa ha ha, now that’s just devilish…devilishly delightful, I mean. Hang on, why do you have it? I-I mean, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

Wasn’t *my* fault for getting caught up in the *rerorererorero*. *Reroreruh*-roh? ’Cause I was in trouble? Well, that was fine, this was a battle I couldn’t lose, especially I had this and *that* to look forward to. Ya know?

The girls were in uproar.

“Where did this Stevie Wondersword come from?”

“Why is the Demon Blade of the Merchant Kingdom coming to have a *rerorero* showdown?!”

“I don’t know who this ‘Stevie Wondersword’ character is. Vizmuregzero is a magic swordfighter from the Merchant Kingdom, and he is a monster.”

They sent him in for a precise operation, so he probably had some presence-detection skills. And a magic swordfighter, on top of that! That meant he could wield any number of magic blades. And his name—Stevie Wondersword!

“*He literally said that’s* not *his name!”*

“Well, with our mutual interest in babes, I think we might get along, but I don’t exactly want to make friends with an old dude?”

“He’s not even listening!”

Rerorero! Old dudes, what did I tell ya? They gotta get burned at the stake. All they’re good for! *I’ll never hand over the babes to you, Stevie Wondersword! Never!*

We’d have to meet sooner or later. It was almost time to restock again! We’d already almost sold out of the wheat we’d replenished our

stores with. I literally just got back from stocking, and it was already out the door!

DAY 67

EVENING

I was just talking about my serious millionaire stocking status and he cut me off?

DIORELLE CAPITAL

DIORELLE CASTLE

HE WAS WAITING for me alone. He knew I was coming. The Merchant Alliance's secret weapon, a magic swordfighter known as the Demon Blade. A master magic swordfighter who could wield any number of magic swords. *What was his name again? Wondersword or something?* All I could remember was that he was into *rerorero*-ing hot chicks.

That was all the motivation I needed to take him on. Any old dude that *rerorero*-ed babes was no friend of mine! Not that any old dudes were friends of mine! ''Cause they were old dudes, c'mon. Seriously.

"At last, the thief reveals himself. Now, we can't have thievery here in this fair city, can we? Return what you've stolen and I'll let you go…for now. I'll even ask for mercy on your behalf. How about it?"

He had a relaxed demeanor, neither too tense nor too lose. Now that —that meant he was strong.

“So you’re Stevie Wondersword? Look, there’s just something that feels wrong about a *rerorero* slurpy-tongued, babe-lickin’ old pervert dude treating an innocent, hardworking, restocking, shipping, processing production manager’s labors as thievery! Really wrong? *Rero?*”

I mean, a thief! Here? Who could he mean?!

“Oh? This is but a child.”

“D-don’t tell me a phantom babe thief has showed up?!” I gasped. “And you’re sitting around here waiting to steal back the babes and go all *rerorero* on them?! I won’t let you get away with that, you old bastard! The only *rerorero*-ing around here is going to come from me!”

The dude scratched his head. “Er, my name isn’t Stevie Wondersword, but…you’re the shipping manager, you say? My word, I thought you were the thief we were looking for. My apologies.”

Okay, so we were waiting for the thief to show up. *Man, the crime rate sure is high around here.*

“It’s all good, although once we catch the phantom-babe thief I’d like to go home and do some *rerorero*-ing myself? And not after you *rerorero* first, and *especially* not all over the thief. Yikes. I mean, just think about what that’d do to Stevie Wondersword’s reputation and all?”

I decided to finish restocking first, although I’d have to get ready to deal with this phantom-babe thief. The question was whether I should let myself get stolen so I could meet the babes myself. Maybe I could consult with the phantom thief first… When were they going to get here?

“H-hang on! What are you doing?” protested the old dude. “We’re supposed to be protecting those goods from getting stolen—why are you grabbing them? And who the hell is Stevie Wondersword?!”

“You still nagging, old dude? Stop spreading bad rumors, seriously! I’ve just put the fresh stock in my bag so I can distribute it to the right people! After all the effort I made to make this trip, jeez! Any interference is just gonna make it harder for us to catch this phantom thief. That’s why I’m restocking in the first place, ’cause we’re waiting for this damn thief that never shows up! Delaying my shipment isn’t going to ensure a fresh

delivery of new phantom thieves, now, will it? It's a bit tight in here! Not that I mind tight…"

This old dude made no sense. Anything that I dropped into my bag became mine by right. That's medieval law—you can gather anything on the ground! Kinda like the fallen forbidden fruit—or was that the people who ate it who were fallen? Anyway, it's plain, simple physics. *What goes up must come down, with me, in my bag.*

"I see now…*you're* the thief! What is this act you're putting on? The goods are arranged, not fallen! This is a warehouse full of properly cataloged goods, you idiot!"

"Arranged? But they're on the ground! Fallen down? Look at this—is this floating? Is it flying? They're *fallen*, goddamn it! That's why I'm picking them up. You're being incredibly disrespectful! According to the laws of physics, gravity brings things to the ground. There's no way these goods *aren't* fallen down! Quit your *rerorero*-ing and use your damn brain!"

His brown cloak hid his weapons, but the old geezer held his hand at the ready as he slowly approached. He was tall and skinny, but his posture was solid, almost heavy. *There's nothing less fun than analyzing an old dude's appearance, so let's get outta here!*

"Fallen down, you say? You just wait a minute. I'm telling you, they were *arranged* that way!" He sighed. "So. You're the thief, then?"

"How many times do I have to explain myself?" I snapped. "This place may be closed but it's totally open! So the goods are arranged…but they've totally fallen over?"

Suddenly, his empty hands conjured two swords, each different colors and shapes. *Aha! Magic swords.*

"Sorry about this. I have to take you into custody now. If you don't resist, I won't hurt you. And if you return everything you've stolen, no harm will befall you…well, we both know that's not true. But it won't be by my hand, and that *is* mercy, I promise you."

He raised the magic sword in his right hand and slowly pointed it in my direction.

"Seize him with Bind and seal him with Halt!"

So this is the barley? More vegetables than before, but not much meat. Hardly any eggs. *Step it up, merchants!*

"Could those merchants be any duller? I ask for eggs and get eggplant! And the green beans are mean beans. They've fallen down, too!"

Sheesh, it was gonna be a workout to pick all this up. Enough of a workout for another round of manju, even. But, tch, how inconsiderate! There was no fresh shipment of sugar. Those merchants were totally useless, I'm tellin' ya. The sugar shipments couldn't keep up with the sales of the sequel to manju—my sensational grand crêpe debut! Unless they sent me more sugar, I wouldn't be able to keep up crêpe production, ya know! Maybe I should send them a letter. A sugar order. *Gimme some sugar.*

"Why are you still stealing—forget that, why can you move? You're really undermining my Bind, my Halt, *and* my threat!"

I figured. He didn't want to fight, but didn't want to let me go either. While I was focusing my energy into my left hand, he pointed his right sword at me again.

"I'll take your leg! Pierce, Spear! You're not getting away!"

He shot his right sword at me, which emitted magic without even requiring a command. *This is tough.* I couldn't resist its effects at my level, so I had no choice but to nullify it with the Spearshield Gauntlets, even though I also needed to absorb it with my Universe Staff… He was strong, even for a Magic Swordfighter. He had completely mastered the art of wielding magic blades. Plus he was an old dude, so ew, stay away!

"Silent magic doesn't do the trick either? But you're only level 21—why doesn't it work? You really know how to shake a man's confidence!"

The first time he'd done it, he pointed his sword at me and said the name of the skill aloud. Trying to make me think it was necessary—tricky! Then he pointed his sword and attacked without saying the name of the skill…ergo, cetera desunt, COD: next time he was obviously going to attack without pointing his sword at me? Hai-ya?

His right sword swapped out for a different one before my eyes. *So, this sword's gonna have a different effect?* I mean, I could literally see the swords, so…

He was gradually, slowly, leisurely cornering me. His natural stance remained steady.

“Okay, stocking complete. I’m pretty busy, so good luck, man! Ya know, with your magic sword (lol) and Stab (omg), all that junk?”

I went through that katana dork phase myself back in junior high. The last time I did a bluff it turned out my own sword was tricking me the whole damn time! That was a surprise. *Plus, I left that dungeon alone, okay?*

“All that being said, if you try to be unexpected, the unexpected happens. Keep chasing those dreams, buddy! By yourself! Peace?”

“Get back here! You can’t take that! Please, just let me catch you! I can’t let you leave with that! Don’t run away!”

Dude, think about others for once, ’kay?

“Jeez, you belong in a contest for least considerate person alive with the meatheads, the old prince dude, and the goblins! What’s even the point of this conversation? You might be worse than the most meatheaded of bad communicators! I’ve been too harsh on the kobolds—Kobolds are surprisingly fluent. They really get the struggles of Mean Girls in particular?”

“Hello? Are you listening to me? I’m begging you—please let me capture you!”

“Let me ask you a question in return—why are you getting in the way of my restock trip? I mean, I’ll be back here soon either way! I’ll pick the goods up, they’ll get sold, then I’ll come back here. In fact, it’d probably be faster to sell directly from this warehouse?”

Should I set up the main branch here? The Castle Warehouse Branch —buy from here for free shipping and first dibs on the fresh stock!

“You’re selling the goods?! And coming back…hang on, you’re *selling* all of that? You really are a criminal.”

Something changed in his eyes. Stevie Wondersword didn’t look sympathetic anymore. His presence vanished. I couldn’t even sense his breathing. If only he could quit being an old dude, too!

Then a golden magic sword glittered before me, the legendary blade Princess Girl told me about: the Sword-Killing Sword. It temporarily

nullified the effects of your opponent's weapons, rendering it invincible in combat. In addition, it temporarily copied the abilities of the enemy's weapon. A legendary golden blade. *Explain why I'm seeing a flash of steel, then?*

Kabooooong!

"Whoo, thanks! Now, let's see if this guy has any loot! Nice, foodstuffs and gold! I'm rich! There's cotton, hemp… Might be good for making a hat, but it'd be a little stiff, I guess? Do we need those? Sure, I guess it'll be breathable—a nice cool hat for a summer day. Maybe it'll be too hard to dye, though? Eh, natural colors should work fine."

Nod nod!

So, she approved. We had a minor morning-star assassination incident along the way, but whatevs. That old dude just wouldn't take a hint. I couldn't sense even the slight disturbance of remaining life anywhere around here, although maybe I was still shaken by that enormous iron ball getting whipped right near my head. It didn't hit *me*, but still. Just a glance at it made me break out in cold sweat.

"Maybe I should look into a Morning-Star-Killing Morning Star. We do have a sickle-and-chain now, so watch out! I mean, I *am* watching out, but that crap is unavoidable! There just isn't enough time to watch out *and* dodge! You can only watch or dodge, and if I don't watch, how will I know where I'm going? *My eyes are already crossed out, so you can't beat me now!*

A hemp cap sounded manageable. But what to do about the old dude? He was strong, so it wouldn't be good to just leave him there, although he had no apparent intention of killing me. He was just targeting my arms and legs. *What's up with him?*

"I mean…he's just *another* old dude."

Nah, he had no fun to offer. *If he did, that'd be problematic!* I didn't need that dude, no way. Yuck. If the slum quarter needed old dudes, they could find them anywhere. So maybe I'd leave him!

…Hm.

It felt like a mass outbreak of old dudes, an underground movement of aging fellows. I bet they were such a nuisance to all the other poor underground people. Like, all the people who lived in sewers and stuff had to put up with the sight and smell of old dudes. *They should file a complaint!*

DAY 67

NIGHT

That poor lady's gotta deal with old dudes infiltrating her stock.

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

WE HAD A stocking problem on our hands.

"Look," Haruka-kun told us, "an old dude snuck into the castle stock."

"S-say what?!" they gasped.

I had heard of foreign substances—like, insect parts or rat droppings—getting into a merchant's stock. That happened, and in very small parts, it was mostly okay. But an old man? *In* the stock? Gross! Imagine it in the manju! And Haruka-kun brought back the contaminated stock with him anyway!

"Er, not that! More like, when I went to restock, there was an old dude infiltrating the stocking place waiting for some phantom-babe thief, but he called *me* the thief and attacked me with his metal Sword-Killing Sword? But it wasn't a sword, it was an iron ball, which whipped at me as he tried to kill me? And the experience is still raw—raw like that old dude was raw? Like, if that old dude gets in our stock, we won't be able to sell crap, ya know?"

"What the hell happened?!" we cried.

The stock itself was the problem. We'd done okay up until now, but obviously that couldn't last forever. Didn't it all belong to the Merchant Kingdom in the first place?

"I mean, I'm not a phantom-babe thief, am I right? And his Demon Blade dropped a bunch of stuff on the ground, so I picked it up. Maybe he'll worry less after I scorch his head? I couldn't just leave an old dude there!

They'll breed! Imagine an old-dude population explosion outbreak! That could turn into a national crisis. Ya know?"

"We don't know. We never know," I snapped. "You can shut up now!"

The more we listened, the less we understood. Regardless, the Demon Blade of the Merchant Kingdom, the renowned and legendary magic swordfighter Vizmuregzero, was rolling around on the ground now.

His eyes were a marvelously defined X-shape, so he was obviously the criminal! *This is a historical outbreak of morning-star assassination attempts, isn't it?*

"But where did Stevie Wondersword come from?"

"And where in the world did Vizmuregzero go?"

No, he's on the floor back there! Haruka-kun couldn't remember his name at all. Curse you, Mary Poppins!

"Isn't that guy supposed to be an invincible magic sword-wielder?"

"Yeah, he's the Merchant Kingdom's trump card."

"Oh, for sure, if Angelica-san's morning-star swipe hadn't been there, there might've been trouble."

"I get it. Still, magic swords are on a totally different level from other skills and weapons, huh?"

"So *that* man is the magic swordfighter, Vizmuregzero?"

"Yep. One of the seven swords of the Merchant Kingdom. But there are only six of them."

"Then why are they called the seven swords?!"

"There's one fewer now!"

Apparently, there was a severe talent shortage in this world. We had heard that only four of those guys even wielded blades. Shouldn't they be known as the Four Swords or something?

"We heard pretty crazy rumors about them, didn't we?"

"Yeah… So, how come I don't feel grateful to Haruka-kun for defeating one?"

“Six people but seven swords, except two of them don’t use swords…that’s just six guys, right?”

“But very strong! Elite assassins sent from the other nations to defeat them were completely wiped out. Word has it that they even killed the Apostles of the Theocracy’s army.”

The Apostle-class soldiers in the Theocracy army were as strong as or stronger than S-class adventurers here, wielding incredible skill-equipped weapons. But even they couldn’t defeat the Merchant Kingdom’s seven swords. But…how did that compare to us? I had no idea.

“We were basically treated like guild S-rank adventurers, right?”

“We’ve got cheat skills, top-grade skill-equipped weapons…and custom bras, you know.”

Regardless of the bras, none of us stood a chance against a certain knockout machine who mercilessly stamped every opponent’s eyes with Xs.

“Yeah, he’s strong. Crazy swordsmanship, super skilled. But I can totally tell what he’s doing, so an undefended morning star to the backside kinda resulted in unstoppable blood loss?”

“Why is the morning star still in him?!”

“’Cause it fell?” Haruka-kun said. “I’ll pick it up like I picked up everything else! I mean, I can’t hold on to that for more than three seconds or I’m doomed? Like, in terms of raw sex appeal? Once I put it into my item bag then it’s *my* item. I ain’t keeping that thing for more than three seconds, no way.”

So, Angelica-san hit the magic swordfighter from behind with the morning star? That *definitely* wasn’t by accident. Then, she dropped the morning star on the ground after hitting him, and Haruka-kun claimed that picking it up meant it belonged to him… I knew he was the world’s craftiest thief, but he left it in the guy. Wasn’t that technically attempted murder?

“Seriously? After all that work restocking. I’m just going to need to go back there again!”

“Every time you go, you leave behind a string of terrible crimes!”

If they locked the door, he’d just walk in and take everything. Even if his hands were full, he’d whack you from behind while picking up the

goods. He had plenty of experience from the dungeons after all—whack the monsters, pick up the spellstones, rinse, repeat.

If a continent or a whole damn planet somehow fell and touched the ground, he'd just pick it up and claim finders keepers. *Yep, he definitely would!*

"So, are the other five swords coming now?"

"I hope not, for their sake."

"Yeah, that's both pitiful and laudable."

"They'd get bonked from behind before the battle even began, after all that work coming here with their weapons… And Haruka-kun would just pick them up and say they're his!"

"Their weapons would only fall because Haruka-kun bonked them in the first-place, to add insult to injury."

"I wish he would steal their weapons normally, then!"

Whenever I thought about what was happening to our enemies, I felt so bad for them. It was always a pitiful sight to imagine, but the reality tended to be even crueler. *I mean…Haruka-kun didn't just strip him of his sword. He took all of his possessions!*

While the rest of us stressed over this, Haruka-kun played with the kids. A huge group of children were crowding around Haruka-kun, practically burying him. As his head bobbed under, he began rotating at high speeds in the center of the crowd, sending the kids flying everywhere. He generated a hurricane of kids, who then rushed back to crowd and cling on to him, burying Haruka-kun all over again.

"What about dinner!"

"I'm hungry!"

"What're ya making today?!"

"Yesterday's dessert was so good!"

"Can we have meat again?"

"Rice balls!"

"We're really going to eat dinner again today?"

“Duh! We worked all day!”

“Food! Food!”

“We want yummies!”

“I liked the omelet rice.”

“Didn’t you say crêpes? Hurry up, Big Bro!”

Even some of the girls joined the swarm of kids, submitting orders left and right as they rushed in and flew around. *I guess they want Haruka-kun to make some rice balls?*

“Hey Haruka-kuuuuun? Will you pretty, pretty please make me a new bag?”

“What’s for dinner? What’s for dinner?”

“Make me another backpack, Big Bro!”

“Haruka, my little brother really loved your noodles.”

“Uh, yeah, ‘Big Brother,’ another pair of mules for me!”

“An order of katsudon!”

“Us too!”

“By the way, ‘Big Brother,’ what happened to the panties you were making me?”

“Not fair! You can’t just *throw* Shield Girl!”

The kids’ eyes sparkled. Ribbons of scrambled eggs danced across the air as Haruka-kun whipped them together, wrapping ketchup rice into proper omelet rice. In squirts of ketchup, he wrote a little message: “Om?” He was the one making the omelets. What on earth was his question here?

He made the sizzling fried *katsu* pork cutlets next, dropping the cutlets down on to plates, smothering the crunchy pork with broth and egg. Fluffy cutlet? My god!

“This looks amazing…” *Ga-gulp!*

The kids looked on at the meal with pure wonder. The impure girls ogled the katsu ravenously. Vizmuregzero-san…still lay on the ground with Xs for eyes.

After that, an enormous pot of stew appeared. Everyone started frothing in excitement over the bubbling pot, stomachs burbling in harmony with the bubbling.

“It’s ready? I mean, mystery bird-meat stew to go with the cutlet bowls and omelet rice, as well as mushroom salad with sesame dressing on the side. Eat up? And stuff? As in, stuff yourself? That stuff?”

“Thank you very much!”

Mushroom salad with a light sesame dressing was his latest creation,. Haruka-kun made sure to include mushrooms in every meal to help the kids’ bodies grow healthier, so he had to come up with creative ways to make sure they wouldn’t tire of them. As he babbled, “I’m not listening!” and “No way!” he tossed the kids away, again and again, spinning and spinning…but really, he spoiled them. I noticed him sneakily smoking some potatoes on the side?

“That was so yummy! Every day is yummy!”

“Can I eat these? And these? Really?”

“I never knew bread tasted this good!”

“If we eat it all, will we still get to have food tomorrow?”

Every time the kids ate, they were moved to tears. They fell asleep stuffed and sobbing. As they ate, they prayed that this dream would never end. They’d spent their whole lives starving, barely anything to eat. They were raised that way. That was why Haruka-kun made a ridiculous amount of food, lined it up like a feast for the gods, and whipped up more—even as the table overflowed with dishes.

That’s not enough. Eat more! Eat until the tears stop coming, eat until your sobs turn into laughter. The excess may have resulted in a few bloated-belly girls… *What should we do?* One more rep during training wasn’t gonna fix it this time.

“That was amazing,” I sighed. “It hurts, but I have no regrets.”

“The only problem is that I can’t move!”

A mountain of soybeans spilled everywhere as we spoke. Haruka-kun experimented left and right. Was he trying to make tofu? Don’t tell me… *miso?!*

Oh! That guy was finally awake.

Vizmuregzero-san. Haruka-kun treated him like a grandpa, but he was an elf who looked about twenty-five or so. He was slender, tall, and beautiful. I could tell at a glance that he was strong. Well, Haruka-kun crossed out those eyes in no time, but, you know. We grade on a curve here.

"Oh my." He let out a sigh, leisurely glancing around the room. "Did I get myself captured? I can't believe it. I came to capture someone, and I got captured instead… What a failure."

He didn't have a single gap in his stance, no unnecessary movements. He was unarmed. Haruka-kun took everything from him.

"Yo, long time no chat, old dude Wondersword! I'm not tryin' to capture you. You just got mixed up in the stock I was restocking. Only problem was, I couldn't sell you! 'Cause you're an old dude, ya dig? Maybe I'll throw you out underground somewhere? Do I need permission from the underground people first?"

"At least let the man talk!"

"And who the hell is Stevie Wondersword?!"

Whoever this guy was, he was an idiot. He told us that he was working for the Merchant Kingdom in order to receive medicine for his sick sister, his only blood relative. Man, his life was a cliché! And the poor man was a fool on top of it. The kingdom had abundant healing mushrooms, the source of which was the frontier. Instead, he took work from the Merchant Kingdom. The people trying to monopolize and hoard that very medicine. *Uh, that's why you couldn't access it in the first place, dumbass?*

"Your poor sister!"

"I feel so bad that her only blood relative is this ignoramus," said Book Club President.

"That poor, poor girl!"

Vizmuregzero-san looked pretty down after that burn.

"No kidding. She's suffering from sickness, and on top of it, her brother is an idiot. That's just a bummer."

“Yup, he’s so stupid that he attacked the legendary mushroom master himself and ended up getting bludgeoned by an iron ball. Poor girl.”

“If he’s so skilled, why didn’t he just come to the frontier to pick mushrooms? Jeez, I can’t believe she has to put up with such a brainless older brother.”

Yeah, he was getting KO’d all over again and again by a merciless rain of burns.

“His only surviving blood relative was sick. He should’ve protected her…instead, he picked a fight with Haruka-kun!”

“Don’t make me feel worse for her!”

“How dumb is this guy? Sheesh!”

Huh? How had he sunk even lower into the ground? He was already in tears from the chorus of jeers about how sorry all the girls felt for his sister and how stupid he was. Even the orphans were owning him.

But seriously, how stupid could you get? This wasn’t just about his sister! All of the sick were suffering. He was complicit in that. He chose the wrong side; he opposed his own interests—I truly felt bad for his poor sister!

Now he was bloody and bruised after having dirtied his hands to try to save her. *How do you think she’ll feel about this?!* Although, technically, Angelica-san was the only person who’d done anything with her hands in that fight.

“I know that it’s not an excuse but… I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything about the mushrooms or the frontier. I thought only the Merchant Kingdom had medicine. I was a fool… I don’t think I can look my sister in the eyes again in this life, or my parents in the next. But please… I’ll give you all of my swords, just please provide some mushrooms for my sister! We have money—I beg you!”

Yup, still a dummy. He was on a suicide mission.

His stupidity was starting to tick me off. If that girl’s only surviving brother gave up his life, what would happen to her?! He wouldn’t be able to trust whoever took care of her next, nor could he check up on her. Even if

she got better, he wouldn't be there with her. That was no different from giving up on her all together. So yeah, we all got even madder at him.

"Oh? That's your deal? Sheesh, what a relief! It's nice to meet a good ole outstanding *rerorero* lover like myself. Ya gotta believe me, it's been nothing but persistent bastards lately. Everyone's ready to charge in without any regard for themselves, but if ya don't take care, you'll never make it over to the duchy! These guys dove into a sea of monsters with a single hoe, not even sure if they'd be able to save anyone at all. I mean, seriously. But to find a reasonable, normal dude once in a while…y'know, it's kinda nice. What was your name, again?"

Haruka-kun was grinning.

"Normal or not, you couldn't get the medicine," he continued, "'cause you're stupid. In fact, for that very reason, you've assisted the people withholding medicine. Yeah, you fucked it up, didn't you?"

He was laughing. *What's happening?* No one could speak. Haruka-kun was literally laughing.

"Here's a healing mushroom. I've got about, oh, ten thousand of them? One or two should get your sister up and fixed. Three will save you from the brink of death in a healing flash. Just a munch and a crunch of an HP mushroom and a stamina mushroom and boom! You're back in business. But you gave up. You didn't care. Your sister is dying, so what? 'Cause what else could ya do? Sorry, sister!"

At that, Vizmuregzero slashed apart the rope with his magic swords. He pointed them at Haruka-kun.

"What's with that look?" Haruka-kun sneered. "You gave up! Of course you didn't get what you wanted? People who give up never do! Nothing you can do about it. Just keep crawling around in the mud, eh? People who stop chasing, who withdraw, they never get anywhere. Sooo… yeah. Your sister's dead. 'Kay?"

Bloodlust. Maddening, destructive bloodlust.

"Give. Me. That!"

The swords danced in a furious whirlpool of screaming blades.

"I thought you didn't need it! I thought you'd given up?"

Vizmuregzero's face had changed. His voice had changed. His whole aura charged up so he could fight on Haruka-kun's level. *Big Brother Haruka-kun's a strict teacher, huh?*

"Hand it over!"

"Why don't you take it from me? No need to get upset, man, just take it!"

A raging bloodlust laced with madness erupted. Magic swelled alongside the madness—but not more of it. He'd reached his limit.

Haruka-kun never stopped laughing. The madness, this enraged bloodlust, the magic swords. None of it was enough.

How could those feelings touch Haruka-kun, coming from someone who had given up? That huckster got by on crawling on his belly—on the struggle, on the never-ending fight.

"So he *is* strong."

"But not compared to Big Bro."

One of the magic swords shone with blue light. It split into more swords as it launched at him, while the sword in his opposite hand hurtled at Haruka-kun from behind. The force of the swings sent his body in a controlled backward tumble—Vizmuregzero whipped out yet another sword he'd hidden among his clothes. He stabbed.

Haruka-kun dodged everything and sent him toppling to the ground.

"What a dope. He could never understand his sister's feelings."

"No kidding!"

Crawling on the ground, Vizmuregzero raised his sword, suddenly transforming it into a spear of stone. It bolted toward Haruka-kun—the elf swung the sword in his opposite hand, which suddenly blazed like fire. Yet another sword flew at Haruka-kun's blind spot.

"H…and…it over."

With one hand on his shaking knee, he transformed one of his blades into a staff. He used it to straighten his back and, almost like it was a paddle and he was rowing with it, he pulled himself forward. He couldn't move his legs. He couldn't even support his own weight anymore, he was so tired. But he still moved forward—only to get whacked by Haruka-kun and go crumpling to the ground.

"Aaa—rgh… Ugh…"

He stabbed a sword into the ground to keep going, tearing up the floorboards in the process. He crawled. He struggled forward an inch at a time. He advanced, blood pouring from his nails as they tore off his fingers,

and he raised his sword, activating some magic spell…only to get flung into the air by the force of the spell.

"Arrrgh!"

Again and again, he got pummeled to the ground. Again and again, he heaved himself forward toward Haruka-kun, shuffling an inch at a time. Haruka-kun only turned his swords away. His own swords slammed into his body. Again and again, he crumpled to the ground.

He simply kept crawling toward the mushroom. He'd run out of swords to swing, he no longer had any strength to move his body. He could only crawl. But when he did… Haruka-kun struck him yet again.

Vizmuregzero didn't stop crawling.

He couldn't even see. He lost track of where everything was. He just searched for Haruka-kun's presence, and kept crawling.

His armor, his clothes, his skin and flesh, all shredding off. But still, he crawled.

Death can't fix stupidity, but one thing about the stupid—they do persist. This guy was a true, proper idiot. And Haruka-kun wouldn't stop smiling. He smiled as he beat this guy to paste.

DAY 67

NIGHT

A superb, feigned interlude was actually how to inter-murder my sex appeal?

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

IT WOULDN'T BE an exaggeration to call this a fantasy-world uniform crisis. I'd supplied the girls with uniforms, and soon Princess Girl and Maid Girl were wearing them—I guess those scantily clad warriors were salty about not matching with everyone else?

"Yay! Now we all match!"

"You look great."

But uniforms were rare in this world, so I supposed it was inevitable. In a way, it was an unfortunate influence on the young orphans to be around such sexy clothing. But like, because it was kinda inappropriate, it was also super funny?

"Maid Girl? As in, souvenir shop employee Maid Girl? My underling? We're dealing with old dudes here, so instead of a clearance sale, clear *them* out. We accidentally bought ourselves an old dude on a mushroom buy-out, but I really don't need him, is the thing? I *tried* to make him work but he's still an idiot! And ew, old! He's just a bonking boomer who doesn't know anything but how to bonk, so I *really* don't need him! What would he even do around here?"

"Don't need him? If any nation in this world had Vizmuregzero the Magic Swordfighter as their ally, he'd be among their greatest assets," Maid Girl replied. "I am grateful, honestly…although, you've turned him into something terrible with the beating you've given him! He is the warrior known as the Demon Blade—whoever has him as their guard would be the strongest in the realm! Are you sure you don't need him?"

Got it. He was an all-purpose type who specialized in murder. A master of upright interpersonal combat, a killer of killers. Made sense he'd be useful as a guard.

"Well, I tried going around asking if anyone wanted to adopt an old dude, but nobody wanted one. You're saying he's actually worth something?!"

We could expect the Merchant Kingdom to give up soon. After their massive investment, they'd made zero profit. We just had to keep piling on the losses until they withdrew. The upper ranks of the merchants should be feeling it now; if they had any wits, they would cut the losses and run. That was what a good merchant would do.

"At the very least, please do not waltz around attempting to sell a legendary magic swordfighter! 'Let me wrap up this old guy for you, for the low, low price of'—no! We can't put him in a box. And one more time, *who* is Stevie Wondersword?"

But these politicians-masquerading-as-merchants didn't withdraw yet. Because the Merchant Alliance would fracture, revealing the Merchant Kingdom as the empty threat that it was. Then the politicians and bureaucrats would lose all credibility, and the government of false-merchants that profited off of politics would fall. If they didn't withdraw, then I just had to go after a few more weak points. When it came to abduction though, we were making the first move. *'Cause I seriously have no use for a damn old dude?*

"So, right now Stalker Girl's clan is gonna go kidnap the old dude's sister with the old dude in tow, and after they do we've got a formal contract. Even after they drag her back, I guess that means we have to deal with the old dude? And there's no place for an old dude in a souvenir shop, so underground is the best option, but it'd be unfair to all those poor underground people to stick him there? Maybe they're demi-humans, or monsters. Is there a dungeon down there? Now that I think about it, the old dudes…old dudes are the real monsters."

In conclusion, it was my moral duty to eradicate the race of old dudes from the face of the earth. Forget this particular old dude! Maid Girl was always with Princess Girl, and she had to do double duty as a guard! Lack of human resources, much?

“Are we just leaving the pimpin’ king alone? Well, he’s a pimp and he’s old, so I don’t care.”

The crew went in my ladies-only, “Sexy Female Knights”-emblazoned, high-speed, reform-model, luxury-splendor carriage, with the ultra-luxurious guard of Miss Armor Rep, so I figured they’d be back soon. *Don’t tell me they’re going off-course to take care of thieves!* Even the horses were leveling up for an even more super-high-speed Cinderella carriage sitch? It felt like some emperor was about to jump on those lovely horses any moment, resplendent in his new clothes! In which case I’d feel bad for the horses. *But ya know, whatever makes the horses happy in the end.*

“With the royal guard out of the picture, and after the loss of the first two princes, we’re really having a personnel shortage, aren’t we? Not to mention how the king’s too busy pimpin’… Damn that pimpin’ king!”

The big looming life-or-death threat was the Merchant Kingdom, and Miss Armor Rep should be more than enough to handle them. *Yeah, I’m sure they’ll come back without getting noticed. And if they do notice her, god help the Merchant Kingdom*. The only thing I could do was pray for them. There were some things in this world that you’re better off without seeing or knowing. For example, Poster Girl’s family, and the knowledge that a Dungeon Emperor had been staying at their inn. If I told them, they’d probably break into dancing, anyhow.

“Maybe I should hire some dancers?”

The old dude gatekeeper just let her pass when I told her she was cool, so I didn’t do *anything* wrong. Why, if you tell that guy anybody’s cool, he’ll just let them past. He even pet Slimey.

“We could seize the princes, but there’s no guarantee that will give us any advantage. Still, the name of Vizmuregzero by itself is a threat. He’s worth a dozen men at least. Station him in the castle and he will serve as an impassable defensive force. Are you sure about selling him? He would be unstoppable.”

Making Stevie Wondersword, the old dude, guard this souvenir shop?

I mean, she was out right now, but normally we’d have a former Dungeon Emperor swinging around a sickle-and-chain, and a former

Dungeon King jiggling off somewhere. The only problem with this deadly defense is that the orphans were picking up how to use a sickle-and-chain, too. What exactly were those kids aiming for?! They were really attached to Miss Armor Rep, but if they followed too closely in her footsteps, the entire continent was as good as doomed.

"That so-called ultimate guard is pretty worthless, I mean, I beat the crap outta him! The whole Sword-Killing Sword sounds cool, yeah, but we're living in a sickle-and-chain era! That's a cutting-edge, cut-your-throat technology that comes at you like crazy. Not that there's any craziness going on around here, I swear?"

"S-since when is the sickle-and-chain a trend?!"

If I went outside and found the morning star was catching on, that'd be the end of me.

"Look, I mean, it just—I dunno, it destroys you with some kind of thingamajig. Some kinda tragic aftereffect. But seriously, an old-dude guard wouldn't be very useful! Ya know?"

Why did I have to help this old dude with his job hunt, anyhow? I was unemployed myself, after all! Said so right in my skills! I was having a glacial job-hunting period. If I broke off a chunk of that glacier I'd finally have a job selling shaved ice. When was it going to be summer around here? Did they even have seasons?

Maybe they didn't have four seasons. If there wasn't a summer, all those swimsuits were a waste of time! After all that effort! Although I still profited. And late at night, I even prospered.

"Even if we do seize the castle, I was wondering what we would do, since the defenses are completely nullified. Now that I think about it, the culprit who destroyed Diorelle's defenses and stole the Eternal Trap is standing right in front of me… Surely it's impudence to claim that you found the greatest treasure of the royal family lying on the floor, and so you picked it up! That's obviously an act of thievery! And you claim to have crept into the castle—no, this is an outright act of treason! Your head ought to be parted from your neck and paraded around for all to see!" (Blah blah, lecture continues.)

Weren't parades more of a festival thing? A festive thing! I'm kind of a festive thing myself! A real party animal.

"Does this world even have parties? Seriously, let me at 'em!"

I could use some party time in this world. Don't tell me my classmates were throwing them without me? Maybe they had. I would part their heads from their necks for that.

"I have a report."

It was a member of Stalker Girl's clan. She was a youngish woman who always vanished as soon as she finished her report. Her head was wrapped in cloth, so I could never see her face, but I had big hopes for her as a babe. *She's got some big boobs, for starters.*

"At present, the noble quarter is close to bankruptcy. Hired retainers—maids, butlers, servants, and so on—have begun to abandon their employers. They have run out of cash and are selling their family treasures, which the souvenir shop is buying from them at minimal prices. Among those treasures, the shop has received three additional morning stars."

So the nobles had driven themselves to ruin, eh? They sold off their family treasures, weapons, and equipment, just to buy a few tacky, overpriced things from my shop. We'd stripped them of their pride as well as their military prowess. Whether they'd survive from here on out depended on their wisdom. Without a little wisdom, they'd die a dog's death. Just look at how the orphan kids had lived and died, and you'd get a little glimpse of their future. Those kids managed to survive by helping each other. *So go ahead, nobles—just try. See if you're as smart as a starving child. 'Cause if you aren't, you're done for.*

"I was thinking about hounding them to hell and back, but they've managed to stumble into a lukewarm hell of their own creation. I guess all I need to do is pop some popcorn and watch?"

If they somehow managed to drag themselves out of their own hell and suffering, I could just toss 'em back into Hell: Part Deux. First stop on the tour: orphan-level poverty, perhaps? I couldn't forgive them for everything they'd done. *Because of them, the girls have* three *more morning stars!* Their lectures just seriously got a (violence) level-up! Those nobles were the worst! *You'll get what's coming to you!*

The noble quarter had already become a hell. With some paralysis-laced fish from yours truly, people were lying around in the street, dazed and terrified by the arts girls' contribution of Nightmare, Illusion, Suffer, and Derange. They couldn't resist the effects of the Ripple Necklace, so yeah…this night was gonna be hell for them. Pure Pain in particular sounded real nasty!

I had a hell of my own to contend with. Today, I was making bras for Book Club President and Fine Art Girl! Yeah, that was plenty scary. *And thongs, too?*

"A standard bra, matching G-strings, and shapewear please," said Book Club President, the very moment I walked in. "G-strings are the most suitable shape for both everyday life and battle, but I don't want any drooping. Night-time shapewear, please. Oh, and the lace panties in a butterfly pattern."

Butterfly lace panties for a teenage girl… Yup, I was gonna mass-produce those!

"Thongs are most comfortable, huh? H-hang on, don't start before I even cover my eyes! And sure, thongs might be most comfortable, but if I start thinking about how everyone's wearing thongs in battle I might have a teenage-boy purity-and-chastity breakdown, which is not super convenient! And please, save that shapewear for the bedroom! But don't strip yet!"

She started stripping the second I entered the room! I didn't even have my human blindfold! Were we having an outbreak of teenage girl pervs?!

"You can already see with Jupiter Eye even if blindfolded, if I'm not mistaken," she replied. "There's no point in hiding anything from those eyes, so it makes no difference anyway. Just get it over with."

"W-well, I still need it! I somehow have to manage to keep my fluttering teenage heart in check, obviously—so *don't strip!* If you've got a thong on then that's a heavy handful of danger, as are the contents of that br *—don't make me say it again!*"

She's trying to finish off my sex appeal one final flick of her fingers! What is she, an assassin? My sex appeal's health is already critical!

“Flick your fingers at yourself, not me!” I shouted. “Wait, no! I don’t mean—stop!”

Oh god, save me. Without Miss Armor Rep *or* Slimey, the mood was intense. A teenage boy was alone in a room with two stripping teenage girls. Yup, this underaged room stunk of a federal crime.

And holy sweet lord, one of them was already in a thong. *Arrest me! This has gone too far!* The atmosphere was already shady and now we were adding thongs to the mix. RIP to me. Proving my innocence would be hard enough in court. My sex appeal had suffered yet another critical hit.

“Okay, okay, enough with the thong! Molester Girl, Fine Art Girl, are you okay with normal bras? *Please* don’t tell me you’ve made a secret Arts Club deal to all go in on matching G-strings?! Not a united front, please! If you’ll wear them without turning me in, I’ll make them, I swear!”

“Granny panties are fine, but I’d be happy to have some thongs for a little variety. I don’t have nearly enough underwear. Having more clothes than underwear is dangerous, you know? Running into the girls’ meeting while we’re doing laundry could turn into a flashing incident. But forget I told you that—that’s a maiden’s secret.”

What, two pairs weren’t enough? She had a special sports bra! Anyway, drying hardly took any time at all with magic. It barely rained here besides, so that pesky precipitation barely threatened drying clothes!

“You’re going to make them anyway,” Book Club President said. “So if looking right at us means you get it over with more quickly, then just do it. In the time you made that blindfold, you could’ve made a pair of panties. If you’d just made panties and used them as a blindfold, then you could’ve killed two birds with one stone.”

“If I covered my face with a thong, my sex appeal would instantly get stoned to death!” I shrieked. “That’s not enough surface area to even cover my eyes! I can’t put panties on my damn face, I’m a teenage boy! I can’t put them on at all! U-unless you’re into that?!”

This is too much. As the tease-fest carried on, I went about measuring their bodies. What they really needed was a puzzle. The Arts Club girls were all-rounders who hung back in the mid-guard, but stuck closer to the rearguard. So they wore robes in battle—like, kimonos. They were modest

designs, so the assets hadn't stood out too much… But damn, these Arts Club girls were well-endowed!

They didn't move around as much in battle as the other girls, so their situation wasn't as urgent, but their size by itself warranted immediate intervention. And the remaining three Arts Club girls were probably just as big! *I've underestimated them!*

"So? If nothing feels off, try moving around. If there's chafing or rubbing, lemme know, 'kay? Oh, or slipping—n-never mind! I adjusted the bra now so that there wouldn't be more slippage, so if there was… I mean, I'm the guy who made the bra, it'd be a professional embarrassment if any slipping happened! And why do I always let slip ridiculous statements like that?! I need to be more careful about my own slips!"

My technique up until now should've been more than sufficient… although you never knew until you shook 'em and such… This was important testing! I swear! Especially for battle. *Especially at that size…*

"I mean, if you really have to check, I guess it's okay if you jiggle them and stuff…but can't I just get an M?"

Initial M?! S&M?! "Even Marie Antoinette herself wouldn't just order a sub like a sandwich! Oh, but that's the kind of crazy stuff you'd scream when you're drifting on the mountain peaks! But anyway, if Marie Antoinette was that kind of ravishing queen, leaving black marks all over history with words like that, a whole lot of high school boys would be studying their pants off in French History, you know what I'm sayin'! The exams would be standing room only, and you bet your ass *Rose of Versailles* would be a hardcore R18 tale of depravity on the eve of the French Disrobe-olution!!"

I was wiped out. I was never good at handling Book Club President. But she finally went quiet. Even she didn't have the ability to talk while having the bottoms measured. The pair of them totally short-circuited.

I mean, they already had twitch attacks when I measured the normal shorts. Thinking about it, measuring for G-strings created a level of peril far above and beyond any battle. I didn't have Miss Armor Rep tonight either, so I would face the challenge of a teenage boy's lifetime then. *Whatever will I do?* Now of all times, where was that night establishment I'd been so diligently searching for?

“Most importantly, how do I move these two out of here? It’s kinda awkward to be standing over their twitching bodies.”

Twitch, twitch.

Yup, I was going to be at the receiving end of some uncomfortable questions if I didn’t remove the two twitching female bodies from this room.

DAY 68

MORNING

A new Marie Antoinette summoned to this world would make for some bad children's educational products.

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

JUST HOW MANY PEOPLE did Stalker Girl's clan have? They always had their faces covered, and there were a bunch of them. Were a hundred temporary employee passes (for getting by the pseudo-dungeon) even enough? I had to ask next time…when that babe Stalker Girl was around, obviously! 'Cause the only person I had with me here was an old dude?

"I have a report. The former first prince's army is expected to arrive at the pseudo-dungeon tomorrow night. Beyond that, we have discovered evidence of five dungeons so far. That concludes the report."

So, they'd finally made it. *Damn, they're slow.* As in, sheesh, there were some serious variations in speed in this world. They'd left the capital at the time of the revolt, and they were only just getting to the frontier now. After a long, long march, they'd finally arrived at the entrance to the frontier.

"Well, while they dilly-dallied, I crushed the first prince, ripped-off the capital with the Capital-Front souvenir shop branch, adopted a few orphans and moved over to the Orphanage Branch for more ripping-off, sent an errand squad off to the Beast Kingdom, captured Stevie Wondersword and kidnapped his sister, and then whiled away a whole lazy day of hustling suckers. I guess I'll head back to the frontier tomorrow to beat them there."

Could you honestly call this a defense of the frontier? To go back *after* already capturing the enemy's keep… That army was probably being controlled by the church after all. Had to be a nightmare for them. Tough break.

“I also have a report. At present, the Third Army Division is half-mustered, with reinforcements coming from the noble’s army and mercenaries. We have confirmed a corps of twenty-six thousand. There is no change with the Merchant Kingdom.”

They took the banners of the first prince for their own. I figured the army would crumble, but it’d been a pretty paltry showing on his part. He was just a pig, after all. Seriously, why would you make a pig the prince, and put *him* in charge of an army? Come to think of it, wasn’t there a monkey in the capital, too?

“What is this place, a Zoo Kingdom? Is something wrong with the pimpin’ king?”

After all I’d seen in this fantasy world, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was an orc duke out there. How have I gotten used to this? Crap, don’t tell me Marie Antoinette got summoned to this world, but Mars—the God of War—was so surprised that he swapped places with her and took up her role in the revolution? I needed breakfast! All this merchandise was going to lead to catastrophe!

Plus, if I didn’t cook the orphans a mountain of food, the housewives whose shopping funded that food would get mad at me. Kind of a pain. There was, once again, a shortage of foodstuff in the capital. The only place with enough to go around was this souvenir shop, and buying stuff here went to profits that could be used to help the orphans. So since I was the only one who could, the housewives made it super clear I *would* be helping. *Wives are something else, huh?*

“Egg sandwiches! Egg sandwiches dancing down from the heavens!”

“Praise the lord, praise the lord!”

“They’re not actually from heaven,” I snapped. “What kind of religion is that? I’m making them, damn it! ’Cause if I don’t, you’ll just eat manju! And if I have to make more manju, I may as well make egg sandwiches while I’m here. So just gimme a minute!”

The egg sandwiches were so popular that they gave birth to a new religion on the spot. At last, I’d secured a supply of eggs.

“Rather than worshipping some nasty old god dude, they’d be better off worshipping egg sandwiches. And healthier too. I mean, you can eat

eggs."

Truth be told, we had a long way to go to getting soft bread. The bread here was hard, dry brown bread. No good for sweet buns or Japanese-style sandwiches. I had been getting tons of sandwich requests this whole time, but even more urgent than those were the requests for chocolate pastries. We didn't even have chocolate! If I managed to make chocolate pastries without chocolate, you'd be right to be suspicious of what was in that bread! I had to somehow find cacao in this world. Had our search for food overtaken our search for a way back home?

"There you go! Mushroom salad sandwiches, for your eating pleasure. I don't need old-god dudes, I could get—smote? Smited? Smitten by some more middle-aged women customers! So eat up?"

"Oh, we will!"

The orphans were getting some color back, pink in their cheeks. *The power of drugging them up with mushrooms.* It was dangerous to play with if you were already healthy, but since these kids were so close to starving, it restored them to perfect health. But Virgin Vice Rep B Marie looked totally beat. She was working too hard. I'd need to give her a dose of mushrooms, too, and order her to get some rest. She had been using Healing and Regeneration nonstop, without even sleeping.

I thought she'd seemed quiet. When I checked in on her she was sailing off into a doze, head bobbing like a sailing ship surging over a pair of swelling, heaving, D-cup—*shit! Where'd all these morning stars come from?!*

"Wh-what's the big deeeal? Don't tell me you bought sickle-and-chains for yourself?"

The girls stared at me with creepy, vacant smiles. "Oh, nothing! Just checking on your line of vision, that's all!"

Why did the nobles of this kingdom have so many morning stars and sickle-and-chains to sell us? Shouldn't the knights fight with swords?! I mean, a knight with a sickle-and-chain? I had never heard of that! That's way too ruthless!

"No, you don't get it, I'm totally innocent! I just wanted to give her an MP potion 'cause she looked tired and stuff, and I happened to see

sailboats swelling on a surging sea! So I gazed out into the horizon like the teenage boy that I am? Oh, and ya know, I was also just wondering if Slimey and his pals are doing okay? See, I'm not the bad guy!"

"Slimey and his pals? That makes it sound like there's more than one Slimey! And the way you were staring, *where* you were staring—there's no way you can spin this one into something pure!"

"Gazing off into the horizon? More like gazing hornily at a porno. Lecture time!"

They yelled at me and *then* lectured me! Look, without Miss Armor Rep around to help work out my healthy energy, all this entropy from making bras and underwear was starting to drag me in impure teenage boy directions. Even I couldn't defy physics. It wasn't like this was easy for me, either! Breakfast ended, as did the lecture once I whipped up some crêpes. The orphans started to clear the plates while the girls lined up the goods and entered rip-off mode for the day.

A long line snaked around outside. Once the Merchant Kingdom cut off their aid, this would be the only place in the capital with a supply of food. We planned to support the slum quarter at all costs and prevent anyone there from going hungry. To that end—rip-off, rip-off, rip-off city, baby!

At least, that'd been the plan so far. The girls were still around, and we had the housewives. The latter were all equipped with wooden clubs.

Then there was the Second Army Division leader dude, who vowed to protect the people at any cost in his service to the royal family. The Second Army Division was the lone defensive division, so they should be equipped to handle defense, right? What's a few orphans plus the whole city?

If we could repel the Merchant Kingdom, the Theocracy would be all that remained. The first prince's army was probably just a small force to test our defenses. The main force would be separate. The Merchant Kingdom would take themselves out of the fight soon enough, when they splintered over the mounting losses, but the Theocracy wouldn't be so easy to handle. The Theocracy would decline without its spellstones. This was a fight for their survival, and that made them much more dangerous.

Every country that had historically defied the church was long gone. The church called it divine retribution. Pretty convenient how the divine always sided with them, no? *Weird* how well-organized these acts of god were, how it always seemed like the hand of the divine looked like the church's army. We'd heard from the god dude himself—*he* said he couldn't interfere directly. Those supposed god fanatics seemed to have every intention of ignoring his will altogether.

But that arrogance was exactly how I could corner them. Read their next move. Form a plan.

I didn't like the lack of books in this world, but stories were still useful here. Legends, tall tales, old wives' tales, mythology. Even if those were all I had, they were all I needed to work with.

I didn't know if it would be enough, but I pulled out all the stops. I did what I could and would compensate for what I couldn't somehow or another. The preliminary skirmish was going to start tomorrow—while that decoy army was causing a fuss, the church would make their move.

In conclusion: kill 'em all. I mean, that was kinda the only thing I could do. Those who could protect others had a duty to protect. Those who could kill had to kill.

Whoever killed first would survive. That was why I had to go back to the frontier.

But this whole capital chapter wasn't over, either. Until it ended, I had to handle the frontier by myself. If Miss Armor Rep made it in time, that'd make two of us. Slimey probably wouldn't, but maybe he'd make in the nick of time before the main battle? Three was the bare minimum, but five—Princess Girl and her shadow—would really get things going. Ideally, we'd leave Class Rep and the other girls in the capital to protect our interests here.

If I didn't make it in time, or if it wasn't enough, well…game over. Five might make it in time, and that would make it even odds. Without enough cards to play, I just had to play the ones I had. And let's say I did make in time—well, that would mean I wasn't in the capital. That's why I bothered to pick up that Wondersword geezer, in the end. I really didn't want to, given he was an old dude and all, but I supposed he had some value after all. I'd found him on the floor, so he was mine now.

The Merchant Kingdom only had a few pathetic tricks left, and old dude Wondersword should serve as ample deterrent. And yeah, he *was* the Demon Blade of the Merchant Kingdom. That meant he opposed the Theocracy, and had intimate knowledge of the Merchant Alliances' inner workings. He could anticipate their schemes. Stevie Wondersword really was perfectly suited to protect others.

"Enjoy the shopping!" the girls chanted, welcoming in the deluge of visitors and profits alike. I heard the sounds of ridiculous rip-offs and preposterous profits. Traffic through the noble-exclusive entrance had decreased, but the general entrance was still bustling.

"Seven hamburgers and four orders of french fries!"

"On it!"

Those stupid nobles had sold off every treasure they owned to buy my cheap crap. But now I noticed, some nobles came through the general entrance to buy regular necessities. Unlike the others, they only had a few precious jewels and artworks to trade away. They purchased plain, unornamented weapons. These were the ones who hadn't attached themselves to the first or second prince, who'd never sold out to the Theocracy or Merchant Kingdom. Ah! A real nobility. Finally.

I made the executive decision: we kept ripping off the idiots that came in through the noble-exclusive entrance, but gave fair prices and even freebies to the ones coming in through the general entrance.

These humbler nobles were the ones who pitied the affliction of the orphans, who were resented by the other nobles for trying to send aid. They'd been ejected from the noble quarter, stripped of their titles, and had fallen to ruin. They were coming to buy actual equipment. Still, their duty compelled them to step up in defense of their king, despite everything. *I've gotta slap his pimpin' ass back awake, don't I?*

It was easy to kill and destroy. But to make—to rebuild, to maintain—that was hard. Absolutely nothing was harder than having to *keep* doing it. Having a king in itself meant nothing. A king needed a people who recognized him and a nobility that supported him. Without all that, a kingdom was nothing.

The orphans energetically rushed around the store while they worked, getting snatched up and hugged by the ladies, earning snacks and accepting pocket change. They'd even learned a little customer service. They gave smiles and "thank you"s freely.

At first, when the housewives tried to hug them, they were afraid. They were nervous, even when the housewives gave them coins and candy. But now they laughed. They even started calling the middle-aged ladies "Miss." What shrewd kids!

They rushed around in a frenzy, smiling as they worked.

Today was my last day here. I'd watched them learn how to smile. I had to make sure they never stopped. I'd send those who stole their smiles to their deaths with a smile of my own.

I'd only spent a few short days in the capital. At first I thought it was nothing but old dudes, so I'd nearly burned the whole place down. Good thing I checked first.

DAY 68

EVENING

You need to eat the mushroom! If you spray it into your eyes instead of your mouth, you're going to injure yourself instead of heal up!

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

FINALLY, SHIPMENTS from the Merchant Kingdom halted. The iron-pirate vessels had reappeared to rob the merchants of their goods, sinking ship after ship—and that's when they gave up at last. They were already strained by all the infighting following their massive financial losses, but the pirates' return was the straw that broke the camel's back. They no longer had the means or capital to keep going even if they wanted to.

The splintering of the Merchant Alliance forced all the merchants to mind their own business—they literally couldn't afford to mess with other countries. If the collapse of their economy led to a lasting loss of political power, they might never recover.

"But for the nerdlords to go around sinking ships as far as the Merchant Kingdom's harbor…they must be seriously pissed."

Did that mean they wouldn't make it in time? *Please, anything but that.* Had I failed, yet again? I didn't know all of what they'd been up to, and nothing good would come of asking about it. For now, I had to protect the duchy. Even if I failed—even if it was hopeless—even if I lost everything else I worked so hard to protect…if I could save a single life, it would be worth it. *I kill to protect.*

"Okay, since we're out of fresh stock, let's swap over to selling our reserve. I guess we've got three months of lavish nonstop party-time supplies from conning the Merchant Kingdom, especially given we never had to buy any stock?"

I had a lot of leftover stuff I'd, uh, found lying around. Not that I planned on depleting my three month supply.

"Now that provisions have stopped coming in, the citizens have opened the gates. It's over. Their fancy protective whatevers don't work if they just open the doors."

Hey, it wasn't like any of the citizens here wanted to join the second prince's side. The capital would fall if we failed to resupply it. The nobles had no choice but to come replenish their stocks at our store.

"And then…let's con the living shit outta them! They stole from us, so they should have no complaints about us stealing it back, right?"

"Says the biggest thief of all!" said Class Rep.

"Is that another declaration of intent? He still hasn't reflected on his crimes!"

"A born thief! He's saying burglary is noble again!"

When that army moves, I thought, *they'll definitely drop some stuff for me to pick up along the way!*

"The nobles are heading to bankruptcy, and fast. Their estates are getting seized the moment they step out of them to go shopping. And the rip-off (slum) quarter is profiting, right?"

"Pretty rough that Haruka-kun keeps building five-story pagodas just to piss them off, isn't it?"

"And he keeps hanging banners from the pagoda: 'Nobles are lower than worms,' 'Greetings, lower classes?' and 'Blue Bloods Refused Entry.'"

"The nobles were so angry they frothed at the mouth and keeled over!"

It was pretty easy to fan the flames, so I expanded my noble-bullying program. They had looked down on the slum quarter up until now, so it was only fair to spend some time looking down at them.

"I dunno if the nobles can survive this, though. They're going bankrupt and losing their estates and everything."

Once the Merchant Kingdom cut the cord, they were sunk. Their income came first from the commoners, then the Merchant Kingdom. They

had no one else to leech off of.

And if they found someone else to suck dry, I'd just rip them off. I'd burn them up. Those nobles that sold out this kingdom had lost the right to lead anybody. I just needed to make them eat up their own fortunes, at which point they'd have to survive off of honest means. You know, the way the orphans had survived up until now. Survive, get by, without anyone else's help. Keep going despite back-breaking work and relentless exploitation, with only one another to rely on. *So like…go for it, nobles? Let's see if you can handle it!*

"Those people saw this town, they saw those children, and they did nothing," sighed Book Club President. "It's questionable at best if they're even human."

It was up to them now, whether they'd live or die. None my business. In fact, my only business here was setting up tomorrow's dinner. We had Cooking Club Girl to take care of the cooking, but because of my notorious skills the prep work was pretty insane to keep it at my level. Essentially, it would take her over an hour to make even a simple meal for over a hundred people? And she was going to use the assistance of the orphans, who had never made anything but thin vegetable stew. It would take a lot longer than she thought it would.

"If I leave them with a week's worth of pre-made meals, what will they do after that?"

Refrigerated meals could last for a month, but we didn't have enough space. For some reason, no one else could use the same cooking abilities as me. I guess I shouldn't act disappointed that no one else picked up Magic Hands and Supreme Thinking and Holding and the like. Why wasn't there just a "Cooking" ability? I didn't have that ability either—to be honest, I had no idea how I could cook like that. I just could. Anyway, whoo, tangent!

"Hey, once the fighting here is done with, you should build an orphanage in the frontier and have them work at the Souvenir Shop Dungeon Branch Ya Know? Let's bring them along!"

"Yeah, the economy is better in Omui. Plus there's a worker shortage."

“We can’t just leave them behind.”

“They finally started smiling and everything! I can’t ever see them cry again. They’ve already cried enough for a lifetime. We have to be there to make sure!”

I suppose it would be nice to have them in the duchy. But…wasn’t it the most dangerous, remote part of the subterrane? The monsters were scary, but the people were kind. There was plenty of food, and more goods in general over there. The city…you might call it a safety zone, given the average inhabitant was a top-rank club-wielder, or maybe a danger zone for that very reason. Yeah, it was kind of a rough city, but all the monsters were dead, so it was safe? If nothing else, there wouldn’t be any more monster stampedes there—and if one emerged from a shallow dungeon, it would be easily handled.

“There’s still a lot of forest and dungeons left over there, so it’s not as safe as here. The magic is dense in the frontier, so even if we crush the dungeons, new ones still pop back up. But the biggest danger of all is when the nerdlords get back—we can’t possibly expose the orphans to them!”

“I didn’t think of that!” the girls gasped. “They might try to make the kids wear creepy outfits!”

Yup, like when the nerds tried to give Poster Girl a miniskirt with striped knee-socks. And—this is still a secret from the girls—it was a set with striped panties, too! Yup, I definitely remember accepting that order. Let’s set aside my complicity to be mad at them for a minute: they slaved away in the dungeons every day to buy a miniskirt with striped knee-socks and striped panties set. And in a classic blue-and-white color scheme, too, straight out of a fantasy. Perverts!

They were a nefarious lot, a roiling, Lovecraftian mass of nerdaroni id. Yep, those dark and dubious disciples opposed modern society. They were a cult who sought the revival of the destroyed and defeated ancient spirits of darker days. If left unchecked, they’d bring back banned retro gymnastics outfits as a mass offering of awesome evil! *They’re a danger to the children!*

“But, b-but…”

“Yeah, the frontier is too dangerous for them.”

Technically, those lost gymnastics suits found a new lease on life via the Volleyball Girls and Miss Armor Rep. This world had already witnessed the ungodly glory of the banned bathing suits from Nudist Girl, Fish Girl, and Miss Armor Rep, and so I had to be the keeper of this secret. I mean, every damn time we had a meeting I had to worry about the *knee-socks knee-socks knee-socks knee-socks* nerd hazard! That was a pain. I didn't need to hear about yet another perversion, over and over, on and on! Boring! Oh, and like, those orphans needed to be protected too!

"Just…just…"

They'd be eying those uniforms, so full of memories of growing up with Volleyball and Nudist and Fish Girl. They were caught up in their boyish memories with indecent, unseemly expressions to say the least. I remembered those youthful feelings myself, of course. I made Miss Armor Rep wear 'em all, and fell into deeply indecent Ares-and-Aphrodite-level nonstop stroking and licking and stripping and staring at those banned gym suits and swimsuits. *It doesn't get more impure than that. Oops.*

"But if we all leave, they'll cry!" shouted the Tiny Animal. She didn't want to leave the orphans. Maybe because they were about the same size?

"Those kids grew up supporting one another," Class Rep. "I'm sure they still want someone to rely on… Being so small and all."

"Eh, she's filled out a little the past few months," I said. "I mean, never mind, I didn't say anything! It's not like the kids will catch up someday and then leave her behind! I mean they will, but I don't mean chest size, I mean, like…*size* size? It's the passing of the seasons, a coming of age story, 'cause even if you lose in the vertical department, everyone's the same height lying down! Yup, you can have a never-ending horizontal puberty if you want, a massive, filled-out future waiting for you? Ya vibe?"

Tiny Animal threw a tantrum! Her eyes told me to stay away! She'd bite me if I tried to pet her in this state. Was she like a rodent that needed to constantly nibble in order to keep her teeth trimmed?

"I'm in the middle of my puberty towards a sexy dynamite body!" she screamed back. "I'm getting bigger, not fatter!"

"Puberty ain't gonna help you there," I replied. "You'll need 'Body Change' and 'Transformer' and 'Monster-Size Queen' and the lot for that.

Look, we're in a fantasy world here? I'm sure that Transformer—in a fantasy sense of the term—can help you out, ya know, like What's-His-Face Prime?"

She bit me! I guess she wasn't a fan of Transformers. Not that I was, either? Look, if I had Monster-Size Queen in my status, I'm pretty sure I'd question if I was a man at all. My humanity was already questionable! And as for my sex appeal, well. That'd be questioned into a rapid retreat from this and all possible universes.

Oh! *She* was back!

"Hey, Miss Armor Rep! Welcome back. Did you get Mr. Rerorero and his sister outta there safely? That's a relief. Getting spotted would be dangerous for his sister. And I'm sure you wouldn't wanna whoopsy-daisy destroy the economically destroyed Merchant Kingdom with your morning star. That'd really outclass all my subtle destroying so far. What a pain! I mean, not my pain, mostly Merchant Kingdom's?"

"I brought…them…back. Here."

Last night was pretty painful for me, so I was prickling to purge Miss Armor Rep of her armor in my room and dig deeply into her *Into the Wild* side. But healing the old dude's sister was first.

"I'll heal her and all, so don't pick me up by the scruff to take me to her, 'kay? No matter how cute I am, I'm not a kitten?"

Look, my poor, lost sex appeal would probably be thrilled to be dragged back here by the nape of its neck like a lost kitten. Should I put up some posters? Anyway, why did I need to feed the girl her mushrooms? I'm pretty sure anyone could do it.

"In fact, why do I get the feeling that a teenage boy shouldn't be shoving fat mushrooms down the throat of a sickly sleeping girl? Well, here we go."

The girl opened her eyes. "Nice to meet you, Haruka-san. I am Vizmerugzero's sister, Erailia. I heard everything that happened—I apologize for my silly brother. I've caused nothing but trouble, and then my brother made it worse. I'm so, so sorry."

"Ya know, I just tried my best (sob)."

She was beautiful. She looked so sick and frail, but she had an attractive face with big eyes and a cute nose. She had such a wise, serene vibe. There was no way that the *rerorero* old dude could be related to her.

Speaking of which, I hadn't been paying attention to him 'cause he was an old dude, but now that I saw how hot his sister was, I realized they were elves. Their ears were pointy and all? I never bothered to look at his ears, obviously. *Who needs old dudes' ears anyhow? Just a waste of space.*

"Ah yes, that little incident," I said. "That cherry-stem-twistin' brother of yours has been a pain day in and day out. Not that I want to get used to it, but the sheer level of troubling idiocy has become a part of my daily life, but hey, whatever. Your brother's paid for his trouble *and* his mushroom debt at an outrageous fee. I made a pretty penny selling him to Maid Girl! Who knew that you could actually sell an old dude and make stacks off it. There must be a truckload of them waiting to be sold down underground. Ya know?"

"You sold him?!" the girls shouted.

"He's a *person*! And even though you didn't remember his real name from the start, you even forgot your made-up name for him! It's Stevie Wondersword!"

Person? He's an old dude! Who cares what he's called?

"All I heard was cherry-lickin'—ugh, it makes no sense, and it's gross! Like the opposite of 'cellar door!'"

"I'm worried about *your* ears, Haruka-kun," Vice Rep A snapped, "and your head, or your status as a human being. Yes, I'm worried about your humanity!"

Okay there, girls, go easy on me with that one. I did all the healing work over here and now I'm having hearing issues! *Anyway, healing first.*

I looked. When I did, I could use my handy-dandy Jupiter Eye to conduct a diagnosis. Since this was a hot elf clad in thin sleepwear, I made sure to glance in a few extra directions. Just for diagnosing, of course. Well, I kinda saw everything the moment I glanced at her, but taking a good, long look was nice. I mean, a hot girl in thin clothes, an erotic elf… no self-respecting teenage boy wouldn't take a peek if they could get away with it. *Uh…*my Enemy Sensing just alerted me that I was completely

surrounded, so… Better get back to healing! *Just how many morning stars can one souvenir shop hold?!*

"I see now. This is the same disease that was back in the frontier. It's some magic ailment that can only be cured by mushrooms. How did you catch it so far away from the frontier? D-don't tell me the magic ailment 'old man smell' has turned into a global pandemic! I knew we had to burn all the old men to extinction! Unless I burn them all to ashes, old man smell will spread far and wide! The world will never know peace!"

"I don't stink, and I don't carry a magic ailment!" Stevie Wondersword shouted. "I'll do anything to help you cure my sister. I don't care that you sold me. If truly necessary, I'll happily be burned for her sake!"

He wasn't spreading the disease, then? Looked like I'd have to find another reason to burn him. The thought to burn now and think later was popping up into my head, but I had to do better than that.

"Well, mushrooms'll fix this. I've got way too many of them, and they'll make you feel better in no time. Erailailaila-san? Go 'ahhh,' open your mouth, and swallow this mushroom? There ya go? The big mushroom'll fill up your mouth, so open wide and slurp up?"

"I mean, he's technically doing it right, but something feels inappropriate! Shut up and heal her!"

"She used to be so pale—but now she's bright red!"

"Don't make a maiden swallow that big mushroom all at once!"

The mushroom had quick-acting stamina restoration and blood-circulation effects, so her face turning red was simply proof that the medicine was working. Why was everyone mad at me? Maybe I shouldn't feed it to her cap first?

"Uh, are there acceptable and unacceptable mushroom orientations? I don't think it would fit in her mouth sideways, and normally you hold the bottom of a mushroom when you eat it. I think I know my mushrooms, guys."

In fact, if other people forced her to eat my mushroom, that'd *definitely* be a crime.

"And it's supposed to be eaten, so what else are you supposed to do anyway?! It'd be a lot more problematic to shove a mushroom into your eyes! Then you'd somehow injure yourself with medicine! That would hurt —a lot! I've never tried it with mushrooms, but I'm pretty sure it wouldn't cure the sickness either. If y'all know so much better, tell me how you get a mushroom into your bodies? Where do *you* stick them?!"

I was just trying to heal the sister, but now everyone was turning red. I guess they all had excellent blood circulation… Oh no! A blood circulation disease was spreading!

"Oh no—not the cherry-lickin' old man smell disease!"

"They're having an emotional reunion! Shut *up*, Haruka-kun!"

Well, the siblings were weeping and hugging each other. I would accept a few hugs from the sister (and only the sister) for my valiant efforts, but given the sounds of sickle-and-chains readying to strike I decided to forego participation. Seriously, how many of those did we have? Why didn't we sell them, and *why* were they now part of the girls' normal equipment? But Miss Armor Rep's silent morning star was the most frightening of all.

All right, time for dinner. Time to make many dinners! The orphans and Miss Sister were running nutrition deficits over here. And as for those with surpluses… *Shit, those are death glares!*

"Uh, no! I mean, not like no, but like, please don't stab me with your sharp sickles and stuff? No, I'm not looking! I'm not looking at your stomachs! No one, certainly not me, was thinking that the lack of one-more-set with Miss Armor Rep yesterday has created heaping oodles of calorie surpluses in those big ole bulging stomachs—"(*Whomp! Whamp! Whack! Smack!*)

D-d-dinner…if I can…make it?

DAY 68

EVENING

Wily insertion interjections, Erailia! But I had to put it deep in there, so why were they mad?

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I felt warm. For the first time, the pain went away. The magic power that was on the verge of snuffing out surged through me once more. The pitch-black eyes watching me smiled.

After my sudden capture, I vowed to commit suicide, but lacked the strength to carry it out. When I came to, a peerless, gorgeous female knight had rescued me. I fell into a trance upon witnessing her sparkling, starry golden hair and beauty. She told me, *You're okay.*

She had a wavering, but beautiful voice. One that exuded confidence and reliability.

"My, master, definitely…he'll save you," she said, smiling. When I saw her face, I knew I could trust her. I'd never trusted anyone besides my brother in my life.

It was like a dream. The world swept by as if it were a fairy tale. I never thought I would have dreams again. All I could think of was my brother, who surrendered his pride and dirtied his hands, all to find a cure for his sister. And here I was, soon to die.

"Erailia!"

I saw my brother's face, weeping, lit only by a night sky full of stars. Tears washed over his dirty face. Were those…bumps and bruises?

"Brother… Whatever happened to you?"

"Just drink this first. We'll talk after."

It was a medicine I had never seen before. My brother had done something else reckless for my sake. Just look how battered he was… Why was the knight averting her eyes?

Then there was a presence that even an elf couldn't sense. A girl?

"The camouflage is complete. We shouldn't be noticed till morning, and even if we are…boom?"

"You're gonna boom?!"

"Uh, well, it's a tool that erupts fire and smoke devised by Haruka-san for slowing down the enemy. From my experience, there's no other way to explain it other than 'it goes boom!'"

"Can we really feed my sister that potion?"

My body felt lighter. Breathing became easier. My pain drifted somewhere far away. No other medicine had ever improved my condition. But now I felt…warm.

"The escape weapons and the disturbance equipment and whatnot are quite dangerous," said the girl, "but I think the rest of his stuff is…er, not okay, but at least they don't go boom?"

"This is not remotely okay!"

"No, no, it's okay. This is definitely an elixir. It's definitely *not* an okay price, but the effects will help her. Haruka-san made it himself, after all."

The girl was like the other knight. She believed in this person they were discussing with a strange intensity. It was a pure trust, the sort that could not be put into words.

"Brother…I'm all right. I feel better."

"Erailia! You feel no pain?!"

"I don't. So what is…"

My brother was by my side, and I felt much better. The sky was full of stars… What dream was this?

"I have a sad tale to tell you, sister."

"Please, tell me."

That my feeble life would suddenly come back to me like this—it was unbelievable. A miracle beyond all understanding.

“So it all started…”

…

“What?”

They had conspired against us. They’d kept me ill; they had enslaved my brother.

“As in…”

“I understand. They took advantage of you.”

“I’m sorry. I was fooled… The medicine was probably low-grade. Possibly even counterfeit.”

Even if that were the case, I should be beyond healing. What medicine could cure me?

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m all right.”

Still, I wanted to believe. I wanted to believe in the starry skies reflected in their dark eyes, the brimming, overflowing faith within their hearts.

“Are you sure you want to do this, my sister?”

“Some medicine can be poisonous at the wrong dose. But you don’t need to fear,” said the girl. “Haruka-san is a powerful doctor. And you feel much better after that first potion, don’t you?”

These miraculous happenings, this watercolor, hazy place. I didn’t realize at the time that this was the beginning of a delicate dream.

Later…he shoved a mushroom into my mouth. A huge, thick mushroom.

DAY 68

NIGHT

Tiny Girl transform! Tiny Tanuki, form a big tank!

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

THEY WERE CRYING, but the kind of tears that would allow them to smile again. Smiling didn't mean everything was okay. Just because you could smile, it didn't mean your wounds had fully healed. We took this moment to cry while we could.

They shed tears, wailing, desperately clinging to me.

"No! Don't leave us!"

"We wanna go with you!"

"We worked so hard, don't leave us now!"

"I'll work there, I'll do my best!"

"I'm gonna grow up big and help move around big stuff, ya know!"

"I don't want my brother and sister to leeeave! I'll go toooo!"

The orphans had broken down into tears. I couldn't tell whose sobs were whose in the uproar.

"Don't go, don't leave us… I won't eat too much…"

"I'll be a good girl, I'll behave! So… So…"

"*Waaaaaaaaah!* You can't go! You can't! I'll work hard! I won't even eat!"

It was a hell of weeping orphans, and they wouldn't let go. They gripped onto my clothes as their bodies shuddered and overflowed with tears. They were *loud*. I felt their wails in my very bones when their mouths got near my ears!

“It’s all right, I’m just going to go out for a little bit. I’ll see you soon, ’kay?”

“Yeah, it won’t take long. He’s got a really, really important job, you know?” said Class Rep. “So don’t worry about it, okay?”

Class Rep and the other girls went around consoling the orphans, but they couldn’t stop the flood. There was no use in logic. It was overwhelming fear; nothing would help.

“You promise?”

“Yeah, and we’ll all still be here,” Class Rep said. “So don’t worry.”

She must have told them that I was going to the frontier tomorrow. I didn’t think it would be a great idea to bring orphans right into the line of a military assault. Or the girls, for that matter. I mean, it might not be a big deal for the likes of the former first prince’s army, but dragging kids to the warfront indicated you had a truly warped home life.

“Haruka-kun!” the girls snapped.

Or maybe I was overthinking it. All the middle-aged ladies in the capital were good people, along with the other citizens. Everyone was nice to the orphans besides the lords and merchants. I decided it would be best to leave them behind. They’d be okay.

They hadn’t been okay. They were hopeless, on the verge of death, barely managing to cling to life. Then, a scant few days ago, they got a beautiful home, people who cared about them, plenty of food, decent work to earn a living… But when you’d only ever known loneliness and starvation, that didn’t suffice. It would be terrifying to get left behind in a city where you suffered that much. Especially after getting attached to some caretakers—for the kids who lost their families and got left behind, what could be scarier? Logic had nothing to do with it—their emotions told them this was scary. Their emotions were right! *Of course* it wasn’t going to be okay.

“Okay.”

No matter how much they laughed and smiled, they had already suffered plenty. It wasn’t even remotely, slightly, barely okay, not if you stopped to think about it for a damn second. How could anything be more

obvious! Sure, the capital was safe now, but I hadn't stopped to consider how the orphans would feel. I didn't have anything to say to them as they wept, and clung to me, and wailed in my ears. *Maybe just turn the knob down a tiny bit on those mouth stereos, though?*

"O-okay…"

Tiny Animal was right. After eating too much and turning into a tanuki, she alone would understand their feelings properly. Plus she'd spent the most time running around and playing with the orphans. She was the one who cried the most after getting dragged into this fantasy world. She felt the greatest loss of her family. She could understand. *Me, I never understand a thing.*

"Really?"

Tiny Tanuki looked up at me, tears in her eyes. The orphans didn't fear the monsters. All of their fears were right here in the capital; they couldn't trust it. It had scarred them enough, though they survived it. I was basically telling them that the beautiful house, the warm futons, the delicious meals were all just little goodbye gifts. What they really wanted was companionship. I couldn't leave them. Tiny Tanuki was right about all of that. I'm sure the extra effort I'd put into fancy meals were a factor in all this—*tanukis do love food*—but her animal instincts were spot on.

"All right. I know."

I'd bring them to the duchy. Finish my business there and then bring 'em back. Just get everything over with.

The defensive systems here were impenetrable for one, so I could leave it to the cherry-lickin' old dude. I gave him magic swords upgraded with mithril, even threw in a core power-up. And we'd given him a few true inner powerups in the form of training (aka regular beatings), forging bodily strength and a warrior's spirit in the fires of hell. He was a bodyguard, after all, so he had to get stronger. If he didn't, I wouldn't close the door on sending him off, ya know, as in to the next life among the clouds. And if his old dudeness rubbed off on me, I'd send him underground instead.

"My sword feels…different."

"Yes," his sister told him. "Now that you've gotten a load off your chest."

Sure, the old dude was strong, but thoughtless too, and way too showy in his fighting style. His technique was to create openings to invite the enemy in. There was a problem with that—openings were openings. Someone could slip in and—bonk? Yup, he was losing weight from all this training, but also spiritual life force. And jeez, his old man screams! Just howling, and howling—sheesh. So obnoxious.

"You're so damn loud! Just shut up and take your beating! I don't need old man screams, and neither do your underground neighbors! You're gonna get a subterranean noise complaint. Not to mention the avalanche of complaints from the souvenir shop!"

I didn't mind making Miss Armor Rep squeal and gasp and pant—in fact, I was a big fan of that. Seeing her make a battered old dude gasp and pant…I'd rather he stop breathing altogether to be honest. *Zip it!*

"Hah… Hah… I c—can't…breathe…" he gasped. "Whew. Still… I figured that even if there was an opponent I couldn't beat, it'd at least come to a draw, especially with this fine blade… But I'm outmatched."

Physically, the old dude was even faster and stronger than Miss Armor Rep. He was over level 100. For a cherry-licker, he also had great technique and a lot of experience. He maintained his own style while still being adaptable to his opponent.

His swordplay was strong, fast, sharp, supple, precise. What he lacked, though, was a showstopper. He didn't have a move that could surpass what was possible. He was a fantastic swordsman—as good as ordinary can get.

"You think too much for an idiot," I told him. "How about just acting stupider? I mean, 'cause you *are* stupid. When you try to think, you trip over your own brain? Move before you think, think on the move. You won't catch me unless you go with the flow *without* relying on techniques. If you show her your techniques, she'll just refuse to let you use them, you know? That's what happened when you tried to take the mushroom from me for Sister Girl. You did everything right, everything perfect, and so you beefed it. It's predictable!"

He had probably never fought for himself before. He could fight to protect others in my stead. So he subconsciously shifted to defensive stances. For the sake of the medicine, his friends, the people he guarded, his

mission. Except all of that was *really* for his sister. *Better beat these bad habits out of him!*

"I get beat up too, ya know? Beatings for everyone! Radical beating equality!!"

"Is *that* why you're doing this?" the girls shouted.

Without the frustration of a beating, the desire to win, then you were a mere sword. If the guy behind the sword wasn't motivated deep in his guts to avoid a beating, he'd never have what it took to triumph when his life was really in danger. Well, he had the fire now, but he got battered away across the room. Still, he desired to overcome the unpredictable attacks and the resulting suffering, We'd whip his ass into a winner in no time. Well, no, actually, he'd never win. She *was* the Dungeon Emperor after all!

Better make dinner now. Gotta get some nutrients into Sister Girl and the orphans, and to those hungry girls who had already consumed a few too many nutrients. Miss Armor Rep was back in the building, so they'd be pretty busy doing one-more-time on all those one-more-sets later. Also on the schedule was my late-night time-to-grind. First, I'd leave and go make some dinner. I mean, it was no fun just watching some old dude get beaten up.

I also had to make the premade meals. Busy time. *I'll make them a mountain of their favorite foods to enjoy this week,* I thought.

"Yaaaay!"

"This food is the best fantasy in this fantasy world, right?"

With the never-ending feast I'd just whipped up, crying kids weren't going to be the only thing I had to worry about. Tiny Tanuki might use "Growth" and turn into a big tank so she could stuff it all in.

"I probably should've figured out how to make Freeze and Dry magic spells for times like this."

Given that I didn't have the ingredients for ramen yet, there wasn't much point to freezing and drying, so I kept putting it off. But would the kids have enough food? Oh, and just in case, I installed a fire-prevention sprinkler into the orphanage. What else… I needed some helpers when I was out. *Okay, prepared food, ready!*

“Thanks for the meal!”

“That all looks amazing!”

Did I make too much? The dining room was narrow. Stampeding feet might make the room collapse… *And now that I think about it, this replica of Phoenix Hall…it’s just too small!* So, inside the compound, I built a normal two-story wooden building. It wasn’t especially gigantic, though I tried to make it as large as possible. I needed somewhere to store all the food. *It might actually be too much.*

“Oh well. It’s ’cause Slimey and the meatheads aren’t here. A weeks’ worth of meals with them included in the calculations would make a whole mountain. Are those ravenous creatures still privateering?”

They were supposed to go straight to the frontier when they were done. Anyway, it was too much. We could donate any extra to the slum quarter before it went bad. Nothing wrong with a lot of food. These kids used to live every day without enough to eat after all, so they ought to feel plenty safe with too much food. And if Tiny Tanuki turned into a big tank, well, that’d just be the consequences of her choices, wouldn’t it?

“I’m leaving in the morning, so take care of the shop for me until Princess Girl and Mr. Meridad show up and the second prince gets captured,” I said. “Miss Armor Rep’s gonna go ahead. Once you guys are finished up, make your way over to the frontier, ’kay? Stalker Girl’s clans will relay orders. Until I’m done stopping them in their tracks and dragging them to Hades, just buy time with plenty of scamming. Take some extra for your pocket change. Don’t worry about me!”

“I feel like we should be worried when he mentions Hades! Doesn’t that mean he’s going there too? Although I guess he’ll be okay…”

The meeting proceeded as the girls vigorously chopped down the mountain of food. There was no stopping this giant tanuki outbreak. Vice Rep C was gonna need her own personal bowl at this rate. I guess if she shoved it all inside of herself, that’d technically make her a bowl?

DAY 68

NIGHT

What on earth does the concept of an anti-hand-blindfold even blind?

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

I KNEW SOMETHING WAS WRONG, and sure enough, yep. My Jupiter Eye could detect the slightest difference, calculate the minutest change. So, of course it picked up on this variation—they had gotten *massive!*

"Braid Girl, compared to when I last made you clothes, one certain part has swelled up quite a bit. Perhaps you could call it a BIGBANG growth as a result of too much nutrition? Boob hypertrophy?"

"It's not hypertrophy!"

Braid Girl from the handicrafts club, Accessories Girl, and Cooking Girl were all short. Well, not nearly as miniature as Tiny Animal, but since a lot of the other girls in my class were on the tall side, their diminutive statures stood out. But this newfound size! Just how much had they hypertrophied?

Sixteen-year-old kids were ripe for growth spurts, but that usually didn't *all* go to the bust. She didn't look any taller, and her waist was the same.

"So the bottoms got tighter, the tops expanded, and the cup size went BIGBANG?"

They weren't particularly large as far as boobs went. But on a four foot, eleven inch frame…those tits stood out spectacularly.

"Not us, that's not fair!" the other two said.

"They only get in the way! It's much harder for me to sew!" Braid Girl responded.

The bra she was wearing when she got summoned here was cutting considerably into her breasts. I should've prioritized her, but it looked like she was too embarrassed to admit what was happening. Before you knew it… The scale of this problem required totally different support engineering than what I made for Vice Rep B. The sheer mass of those bazoongas was concerning, but this was more of a ratio problem. The ratio of breast to the rest of her body was too extreme. I needed to somehow restore balance. As for why a teenage boy needed to restore balance to the breasts and make them more proportional to her body—that was a mystery to me. If I thought about her instead of me for just a sec, I could see she was really having trouble moving.

As such, I delayed my departure until the morning. If she ended up needing to fight, those knockers could cost Braid Girl her life.

Cruel world, I thought, *where your life depends on your bra.* But even crueler was how that responsibility had been foisted upon a teenage boy! Your typical isekai hero wasn't burdened with bra-making!

"I don't remember bras being such a serious life-or-death crisis in the novels I read."

Ever since embarking on this bra-manufacturing experience, I'd wracked my brain trying to remember if any isekai heroes had ever saved the world through manufacturing bras. Nothing! *…I'll ask the light-novel nerd experts about it next time I see them.*

"Huh? What's that rustling?"

"Ugh—ahhn!"

"Don't narrate, please. You see, Miss Blindfold behind me has truly mastered the art of hand blindfolding, which means she's mastered when to sabotage me, too!"

Yup, I should've expected this from a wielder of the Sword Goddess ability. She'd parted her fingers at the first gasp! She could tell it was coming. She could sense the next move ahead of time. *Use that in battle, please? That ability is kinda useless when it comes to blindfolding?*
But hang on, shouldn't predictive blindfolding be used to blind me, not the other way around?!

"Uurrrmfh, ah!"

“Aaaaah!”

“Nnnf, urrrg…”

There was a wide area to measure. Compared to the normal hemispherical shape, Braid Girl had more of a round swell, closer to a full sphere than a hemisphere. There was a much more complex surface area to measure compared to Accessories Girl and Cooking Girl. Magic Hands had their hands full. And when she moved while those hands were at work… As suspected, the center of gravity was too far forward. She might develop a stoop.

“Normal bras will do the job for you two, so I’ll adjust the models according to your measurements. But for Braid Girl, in order to prevent the weight of her chest from causing her to slouch, I’ll need a mechanism to hold the breasts up… And that will keep them closer to the body, so it’ll have a real push-up bra effect. That will prevent bad posture and ensuing health problems. It’ll make her one sexy Braid Girl to boot! We’re shooting for sophisticated sexy here, ya know?”

A more supportive bra emphasized the cleavage, so the boobs would necessarily surge up in the top area a little—her chest would be incredibly visible, even in clothes. She probably wanted to avoid that and wore bras that didn’t fit as a result. And since when did I develop the instincts of a bra sommelier? How did I know exactly whether or not a certain bra would fit at a glance?

“O-ohh… J-just try to hide them as much as you can.”

It was a completely useless ability for a teenage boy. In fact, its very presence dealt further damage to my sex appeal. Imagine a teenage boy with the Girls' Underwear Sommelier ability—I'd never be able to look at my stats again!

"I can't turn away from my calling, though. If we don't hold them up, then you'll end up stooping, which will make it hard to balance when you move. You purposefully tried to bind your breasts down, didn't you? You'll end up a hunchback, you know. If you didn't have to fight, I could make you a bra to de-emphasize them, but if you're gonna fight the only way to make it is with maximum support. What should I do?"

Bad balance could even be fatal for the relatively protected rearguard, much less a mid-guard all-rounder who wielded spears and longswords in close combat like Braid Girl.

She paused. "I want to fight. Please make that one!"

"Okay, well, I'll at least try my best to maintain a natural shape!"

"Thank you."

It really didn't bear saying, but if you don't mind me saying it anyway… It is *not* normal for a teenage boy to worry about how to make a bra that maintains a natural body shape! In *so* many ways.

"Wow! It feels light!"

Braid Girl needed a thick, sturdy back strap, a correctional design. The back of the design was clunky, but from the front it was jaw-dropping! Not that I was looking!

Whether or not I was looking, I had to verify and adjust the shape as I made the bra, so I knew. I took those enormous breasts and grasped them, enveloping them and shaping them upwards until they were fully supported… That was sexy as hell. I'd leveled up from tactical-combat bras to twelve-hour-wear correctional sexy bras in a flash. This was revolutionary, hyper-advanced technology!

"Okay, you three, try to move around. If nothing feels weird, then try to jump and move more suddenly. If something's off just tell me. We're still in the adjustments phase so I can easily make changes, ya see? Not that I'm seeing…"

“Wow!” said Braid Girl. “It’s so light and easy to move in! But it’s kinda…”

“Super erotic!” gasped the other two.

Yeah, no kidding! I was starting to feel like a certain rocket could launch, or maybe a missile, which was tough to say given the vicinity of two murderous morning stars? That rocket diving down to the earth was dangerous, but I was very down for any destructive weapons that could cause my missile to blast off!

“No, like, please don’t open your fingers? I didn’t just say that aloud, right?!”

How could she predict my thoughts and open her fingers with such perfect timing?!

“And for god’s sake, stop randomly forcing my eyelids open with your fingers! That can’t be an accident, you’re straight-up forcing my eyes open!”

Miss Blindfold Rep had so little inclination to blind me that she was forcing me to see!

“Why does my new blindfold seem to have so many holes in it? What —*glasses*? I can see even better, now! That conflicts with your whole raison d’être!”

Shake shake!

I was in an uphill battle against my own blindfold. *I mean, at least* try *to be a blindfold?* Well, the bras were done, so bottoms were next. I had a lot of orders there, especially because these three were the fiercest supporters of the Shapewear “Make Us Perky!” cause.

“Unlike the athletic girls, our butts get so flabby!”

“Yeah, exactly!”

All of the girls were members, so I was making shapewear for everyone anyhow.

“We just want to have firm butts like the others.”

“Exactly, exactly!”

They say that knee-raises and squats lift and firm, and that alongside strengthening the glutes, stretching the lats also helps. Strengthening the gluteus medius is the most important for having a firmer butt, so working on that muscle supposedly can naturally give your butt a much nicer shape. Glute kickbacks, or extending your leg and kicking when down on all fours, is the best exercise for that. In conclusion:

"Ya'll gotta *exercise*!" I shouted. "You can't just ask a teenage boy to make your butts firm! And after running around and exercising nonstop in this world there's no way you're flabby down there! I'm more worried about you girls getting *too* macho! You're getting literal sixpacks. What about all that daily boot camp you're doing?!"

"It's not enough! We need the shapewear too!" they yelled.

Well, what was the harm? Measuring those G-string panties yesterday hadn't required a full mapping of the 3D landscape down there, whereas shapewear wrapped up those meaty inner thighs from all sides. As I measured the butt and thigh area with Magic Hands, I used Holding to massage and make adjustments. *You know how this goes by now.*

"Eeeeeeeeep!"

"Wa-a-ahhhhhh!"

"AAAAAGH!"

Per their requests, both boobs and butts were lifted up and separated, and so their spirits separated, then were lifted up to the world beyond. They fainted with, er, smiles on their faces, as if they had accomplished something. That meant I had some orders to fill, didn't it? Not that they could respond now. Yeah, those were some broken expressions. What would I do if they actually broke? Maybe I should stuff some mushrooms in their mouths just in case?

Now for a few quick little measurements to make sure I don't need to repeat this… Not that you could ever take measurements that stayed the same forever. There were already additional orders on the way, but I had anticipated and finished those. Why did this scene get even weirder now that I was shoving mushrooms into their mouths? *This is just a healthy, natural food? What's wrong with that?*

DAY 69

MORNING

Pretty pathetic that a self-proclaimed millionaire is making less than the people living in the slum quarter.

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

MORNING CAME. It would only be for a little bit, but Haruka-kun would be gone. The fact that he was going off by himself meant he was doing something dangerous. We had a 100 percent success rate on that so far. We were naturally worried.

"I'm off, but I don't think there'll be any issues, so no need to hurry, 'kay?" he said. "Well, if I call you, I want you to rush over. But make sure you prepare for battle and completely equip yourselves! Because if I call you, it'll mean battle, but if not, don't worry about it. So just be ready, please?"

I knew that the problem wasn't the fact that he was going to face off against an army of thirty thousand by himself, but what would follow that. I could tell he was getting serious.

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll be ready."

"We'll be there in a flash. Tell us when you need us."

"That's why we've worked so hard up until now. Not to be able to protect you, but so we can fight alongside you."

"We're all ready. We're locked and loaded."

"See you soon. And please, actually, literally be careful!"

"Okay, I'll think about it. The frontier's our home, so I'll totally get our home back and stuff? I'm off!"

Those were his parting words as he left to do battle alone. Sheesh.

They say that even the dog doesn't get in the middle of a lovers' quarrel, and Haruka-kun somehow sounded like a wife on his way to give the scolding of a lifetime. The scolds in this city were pretty frightening too!

"Take care!"

"Don't forget your promise!" called the orphans.

At breakfast, Haruka-kun had taken the time to talk with each orphan one on one, and did a pinky promise with anyone who wanted to go to the frontier to take them with us. I mean, he could give out those life-or-death kinds of vows to dozens of kids because he had Regeneration abilities, so maybe it wasn't as serious to him as someone a little more human, but…he gave out those promises, and then departed. The kids managed to smile as they saw him off.

We had to protect this souvenir shop and the orphans at all costs. The shop was the food supply of the capital now. Until the thousands living in this capital were free to live and trade as they wished, we had to protect them. We had to stay here. It was frustrating. I understood why, but even after talking it through and coming to an agreement, it was still frustrating. Haruka-kun was all alone. Again.

"And…he's gone."

"All right. That means it's time to work!"

"Let's get started!"

He didn't have Angelica-san or Slimey with him this time either. He disappeared so casually, just as he had done all those times before.

"We gotta protect the citizens of the capital, so we gotta keep some of our heroes here, ya feel? Murimuri Castle will give 'em hell, so I'm more than enough. Just like being in the right place at the right time, the right person can really make or break a plan, so since I'm the right person, I don't need more of a plan than just me. Got it?" Those were his last words to us.

That was his plan. But having an approximate idea of a plan wasn't really having one at all. We really couldn't talk him into one, so there was no use in worrying.

“Let’s open up the shop.”

“If we don’t rip people off and get rich, the scam boss of the world’s largest slum quarter will be disappointed in us.”

“On it!”

The third army division had collapsed, with only a few thousand soldiers remaining, but the armies of the regional nobles had amassed and hired mercenaries. Not to mention the thirty-one thousand local brigands and ruffians, whose ranks were ever-growing.

But numbers didn’t matter—the real danger was aid from the Theocracy. They had magic items and the power to make it through the pseudo-dungeon and destroy Murimuri Castle. They were coming because they knew they could win. *I’m sure that confidence is overconfidence, but they’ve got something prepared.* And if they had a hand to play, Haruka-kun had to prepare a hand to overtake theirs.

Although… I wasn’t sure how anyone rational could take on Haruka-kun as their enemy. Forget rational, they must’ve had a death wish. If the Theocracy and Merchant Kingdom had someone on Haruka-kun’s level in terms of trap-setting, tricking, and ripping-off abilities, those nations would have all unified long ago…unified in complete extinction, that is.

Normally, a clumsy move against other nations would be apologized for and withdrawn. Siding against Haruka-kun, though? Taking him on at full force—they were dead. If they just apologized and bought Omui’s spellstones, nothing would have ever happened. In fact, that’s what Haruka-kun wanted. He worked for that goal. Instead, they’d chosen war.

So, Haruka-kun went to the battlefield alone. He had to kill. He was the one who did everything he could to stop war. He arranged it so that there was always a chance for more discussions, for negotiations, and he kept waiting. They wouldn’t see reason. It wasn’t his fault.

If the church and its god didn’t accept those efforts, Haruka-kun had every right to pursue his current path. He was the one who struggled to create a happy, peaceful world where we all could have better lives. I can’t accept a god who ignored all of his hard work. If that was their faith, we’d send it back to them, wrapped up like a gift. A firm, fancy *no, thank you*.

Omui had become a place where we could dream. All Haruka-kun wanted was to make a place where we could smile again. So I… I just couldn't accept a god who would take that from us. A god who deprived us of our wish to be happy shouldn't exist in this world. In any world!

And if defying the justice of god made Haruka-kun evil, then we were evil with him. None of us wanted that kind of justice. We didn't need to listen to those teachings. And we would never accept them.

The whole class was angry. That the so-called church was trying to destroy the happy world that Haruka-kun had cobbled together. They hadn't even cared about how brutal the frontier was before, and now that it was happy, they wanted to take it away from us?

We were angry because we knew how precious and lovely Omui had grown—how beautiful, how miraculous. We knew how hard Haruka-kun had fought for it. Haruka-kun had been working behind the scenes to protect the frontier without any bloodshed, finding a way so that no one had to die. He acted clueless, but he tried so hard.

It was all for nothing. They threw it away, and now they were trying to invade the frontier. Of course we were furious! No one could accept it! They trampled on the dreams of the one boy who believed a happy ending was possible.

Haruka-kun fought for a small, ordinary happy ending. He got mad for others, suffered for others, cried for others, fought for others. He was always happy to play the villain, make a mess, so long as it was for the happiness of others. He threw his own feelings out the window, dangling his own life like a fishing lure to be cast into the water, just to catch a little happiness. He screamed and sobbed for others; he did nothing for himself. *That* was why we were so mad. He only got mad for the sake of others—so we had to get mad for his sake.

Haruka-kun was worried about us experiencing any danger, even now. He still regretted that we had to fight at all. God, we were angry.

But Haruka-kun, I thought, *this has always been our fight too.*

Seriously, we were beyond pissed off. We had enough anger for all of us and him besides. This was our rage! This was our fight, and while he tried to keep us out of it, our feelings were in the fight with him! We

couldn’t let this stand! The sacrifice of Haruka-kun’s feelings, thoughts, wishes for the sake of our happiness. He wanted to protect it all, and they stomped and spit on those feelings. *I can never forgive that!* We wouldn’t let them do it!

In our girls’ meeting, I learned that the whole class felt the same way. So we would finish off things in the capital quickly and march straight to the duchy. Both shops were beyond busy today. We’d overrun the capital with the might of this souvenir shop. *Diorelle will fall.*

The synopsis and conclusion had already been written. The actors memorized their lines. Everything would go smoothly. We’d end this decisively. No one had ever seen such a vicious ending in their lives.

We were going to end this, because we couldn’t endure it any longer.

The legendary, impregnable iron wall of the Diorelle capital would fall today. That was the ending he deserved, so we had to deliver it.

DAY 69

NOON

They called me a force of nature and I had my lines all prepared. But I couldn't even get on the stage!

SOUVENIR SHOP

ORPHANAGE BRANCH

FINALLY, the Merchant Kingdom withdrew. We hadn't received notification from the Merchant Alliance yet, but the most intelligent merchants were all running for their lives. Several of them had already been captured.

"We have apprehended the merchants, but some of the nobles are attempting to follow."

We shortly learned from the captured merchants that they hadn't surrendered yet, but now there was a rumor that their ships were being sunk. True or not, their shipments weren't going to arrive in the capital anymore.

"Don't take your eye off the prince," I commanded.

"Yes, milord!"

Now the capital had no choice but to open its gates. The city would starve otherwise. The second prince's coup d'état had failed, his position as an heir to the throne had been stripped away, and so we were unlikely to see him on the stage again. Just a single souvenir shop had managed to free the capital from the Merchant Kingdom.

But the gates wouldn't open. Did they still think the Merchant Kingdom's aid was coming? Or were they refusing to face reality?

"Once we secure the king's safety, I'd like to strangle that little princeling to death."

I had a feeling the prince wouldn't stop struggling until he was finished off for good. His only option was for his faction to confiscate goods from that souvenir shop anyhow. I knew he wasn't the brightest, but he certainly didn't know how to give up.

"If those dolts seize the souvenir shop, the capital will no longer have anyone capable of supplying food to the people. Could the prince possibly believe that a subjugated souvenir shop will still do the bidding of Diorelle?"

"A simple emergency tax would more than suffice!"

He could only see what was right in front of him, to the point where he was going to try to cut his own lifeline. But that line was already wrapped firmly around the nobles' necks, steadily suffocating them. He was desperate.

"We are not tax officers. The frontier is already recognized as a special independent territory—the capital has no right to apply a tax. And no matter how many orders they issue to us, the second royal division, we will not lay our hands on the people," I stated. "If you decide to harm the civilians…you have broken our contract, and we will seize you instead. That was the agreement."

We received notice of the launched attacks by the military before we heard about a possible seizure of the souvenir shop. All of those soldiers had already vanished.

"Then what will we do?!"

"There is plenty of food in the capital."

The military police who protected the second prince's faction, the merchant faction, and the nobles were on the brink of annihilation. They had lost. What kind of fool couldn't see that? All they had to do was open the gates.

"No! We will never open the gates!"

I remembered what that boy said about the nobles when he came to the barracks: "Their heads are full of hopes and dreams, so stuffed with fantasy and delusion that they won't even open their eyes—so really, there's no point, ya know? Just refusing to admit that reality isn't what you want it

to be and stuff. If they really did get it, no words would be necessary in the first place. They're not confused—they're just old dudes rejecting the truth and burying themselves in a convenient fantasy. There's no point. Because they're old dudes?"

So they were ignoring reality, choosing to believe they could retake the capital? They rejected the truth, clinging stubbornly to the hope of their secret agreement with the merchants. They weren't doing anything to ensure that result. They just searched desperately for the fantasy that was most convenient for them.

"If you continue to stifle the supply chain, the citizens will open the gate," I continued. "You can either have them open the gate themselves or let the souvenir shop keep providing the people with the goods they need."

The nobles tyrannized and stole from the people of this city, guzzling up wealth that the citizens earned until they were full to the point of vomiting. They were inviting doom upon themselves with their greed. What an ingenious trap this boy had made for them! How easy it would be to escape, if only they would renounce their evil ways. The boy had provided the rope and they had used it to hang themselves.

Before all this, the blockades and restrictions on distribution upset the civilians. If the souvenir shop hadn't set itself up in the city, there would've been riots. Miraculously, bloodshed had been avoided—at the very acceptable price of the wealth of the merchants and nobles. This conflict would finish without swords ever crossing. What could the nobles even do at this point, except call in their military police? And what good did they do now that souvenir shop had armed the citizenry?

They planned to struggle to the end. Reckless! Just a few thousand soldiers and police could never dream of overtaking the souvenir shop. Even my own second division couldn't conquer it. Any attempt to invade the slum quarter was doomed. Even if they made it inside the quarter—the Sword Goddess, along with her twin in beauty and power, Princess Shalliceres, and their troop of a few dozen could easily protect the souvenir shop.

I supposed that was why the boy entrusted myself, Terisel, who would never betray him, to deliver this message. The inhabitants of the slum quarter were already well equipped and would defend the souvenir

shop with their lives. It was the place that saved them from their poverty after all. It had brought smiles and laughter to the children of those streets. They would become the shop's shield. They would fight to protect it.

I won't permit any interference either, I thought. The second division would protect that shop with our lives. I wouldn't dare point my sword at the saviors of this kingdom.

"This is the moment," I said.

It was the duty of the second division to serve as the shield of the king, the shield of the people. Our shield was the coat of arms. If we ever raised a hand of violence to the people, it would disgrace the very name of the second division. It would pervert the very foundation of our nation, our king.

"How was the shop?"

The souvenir shop had its own elite defensive force. But if we permitted the fight to reach them, I would be ashamed. They could watch us defend them.

"Open per usual and lively with the smiles and laughter of women and children. In that store lies all that we wish to protect."

The happiness of our people—our purpose was to defend that. Our kingdom had neglected it, and we'd nearly lost it all. Everything was in that shop.

To think the frontier would become a scapegoat yet again, that same domain that fought for the protection of this land. Anyone who attacked that store was no better than a bandit, be they soldier or lord. Our military had no need for that kind of ruffian. Not in my division, at the very least.

"But it's still so lively… To think that the capital fell without a single drop of blood from the people!"

"Not just that! They managed to deal the Merchant Kingdom a fatal blow without ever launching an invasion. They're completely out of our affairs. It's incredible."

We truly couldn't have won with fighting. This fight was above the level of soldiers and politicians. But even now, precious time was dripping

away. Those nobles continued their ugly struggle without even knowing its cost.

"My lord… We were saved, but the frontier…the frontier will be sacrificed…"

We may have captured the first prince, but the nobles' army was still on the move. The prince was a dupe. His army was truly led by the church-allied nobles. The military force of both the kingdom and the frontier were stationed here in the capital. In order to save the capital, the frontier was left defenseless—sacrificed. The third division may have broken off from the noble faction, but many sons of nobles from the third division remained. The nobles had the advantage, and they had even more swords coming to their aid.

"There's not enough time. I know that we won't make it in time, but while the frontier is under attack, how can I possibly face Lord Omui? If we can take the second prince's head…"

"We have a report! They have opened the gates. General Shalliceres and her Imperial Guard, along with Duke Omui and the frontier army, have entered the capital!"

"Then I shall leave at once," I said. "Stay alert for the remnants of the nobles and the military police."

So, they opened the gates? That was too fast—the guards should still have had ample provisions.

"It's the Souvenir Shop Capital-Front Branch! They have launched a massive bargain sale on foodstuffs, garments, daily necessities, and more. In response, the city populace has forced the gates open!"

"It never stops, does it? This city was cornered by that souvenir shop from the very beginning."

All I could do was laugh. They were on a different level. They played a different game. That boy and his friends didn't even give my forces a chance to help.

"We ride to meet Lady Shalliceres and Lord Omui! Assemble and stand by!"

"Yes, sir!"

All of the players had gathered on the stage. Only the final act remained. At long last, we could laugh and watch the curtain close on this vile play atop the souvenir shop's stage. Although this unexpected conclusion was wildly satisfying, I could not help but think what a shame it was that the boy who wrote the script could not be present at its finale.

This was a comedy. The kind of farce that made you laugh from the bottom of your gut. The reviled slum quarter, cast aside like garbage, and the nobles who threw such wild fits that they passed out with rage. Those same nobles suffered a catastrophic reversal of fortune as their wealth bled out into the hands of the penniless people. In the end, the lords became the downtrodden.

General and Princess Shalliceres embedded her elite vanguard of forces into the city. The living legend Duke Omui, who led the mighty frontier army, followed suit. The capital had been on the brink of collapse. But now, it owed its revitalization to those two heroic champions. What a difference a good actor makes! A vast gulf divided the princess and the nobles from these two, who were truly noble in their love for the people of Diorelle. There was no comparison.

The city was frenetic. Their heroes had saved them.

All laid down their swords. Enemy or ally, no one could point their sword at the Imperial Guard, nor at the frontier army. All they could do was step down in defeat, without a drop of blood spilled.

"Welcome back, Princess Shalliceres," I said. "Allow me to lead you to the castle. And thank you as well, Duke Omui."

But my gratitude was far from enough to repay Lord Omui. His duchy had been forced to deal with our own chaos, but now… His people, his domain. They saved us. We should have been the ones to come to their rescue.

"It's good to see you, Terisel," said Lord Omui. "But you should smile—look at your people. Don't look so down—laugh! I'm not worried about the frontier, and I haven't given up, either. We have been given this happy moment by the boy, so feel free to rejoice. The boy said he would do something about the frontier, so our only job is to enjoy this moment. Smile, Terisel!"

We had the forces of the kingdom and the frontier here in the capital. By my logic, only the enemy noble forces remained in the nation. No soldiers on our side remained in the frontier.

Still, I forced myself to smile as we made our way to the castle. We had won.

"To the castle!"

I could not let my worry go. How could the boy possibly do anything about the frontier? No matter how ingenious his strategy, he had no soldiers to fight. And yet I heard he went alone, without a single companion, on foot. I was supposed to smile and laugh, knowing this? If that was the role the boy asked of us, then I supposed I had no choice but to grind my teeth and smile even if I bit through my own tongue.

From here out, the final few lines of this farce were a foregone conclusion. The second prince and the nobles fell to their knees as Princess Shalliceres and Duke Omui gallantly paraded through the city. Then, they bestowed the secret elixir from the frontier unto His Highness. A mere split second later, the king regained his consciousness, and the crown prince relinquished his seal as the representative of the kingdom.

Fin. The long-awaited restoration of the king.

The prince and the nobles were quickly arrested in the name of the king. As soon as the news was reported in the streets, the throngs burst forth in even more rapturous celebration throughout the capital.

The king and Duke Omui declared a tremendous festival, overflowing with food and alcohol. This festival marked the revival of Diorelle. The king and princess waved at the people from the castle terrace. Duke Omui and, to my terror, *myself*, were called forth to smile and wave.

The players gathered on stage, and the citizens enjoyed the story's climax.

All those who might interrupt this performance had already exited the stage. Only the king and the nobility who had stayed true to the kingdom remained. Some of the true remaining nobles had scrounged the last of their fortunes to buy swords at the souvenir shop. The clerks gave those true nobles a 'freebie' of a sword and magnificent armor as a splendid gift of thanks. They opposed the wealthy lords and tried to help the people of the

slum quarter, and they'd been driven out and lost their titles as a bitter reward for their virtue. Now they were the ones recognized as the only true nobility.

On the stage of this epic, there stood the heroes: the king, Duke Omui, Princess Shalliceres, as the city glowed with its adulation of the heroes. But it was bittersweet. The black-haired, black-eyed boy did not take his bow during this final curtain call.

The clamor and cheering of the masses was enough to nearly shake the city. *It's over, at last.*

"Terisel," the king said. "I'm sorry. Thank you for protecting the people in my stead."

"Y-Your Majesty! Thank you, my king…"

Alas, the real people we ought to be thanking were not present on this stage. The boy and his friends, who deserved the admiration of the people, were not here. Those girls were making their way to the duchy. They rushed to where the boy who truly freed the capital fought alone.

"Your Highness," said Duke Omui. "I shall return to the frontier. The capital is yours to govern, and I have much to do in my own domain."

"I've caused you trouble, Meropapa. In the end, the Omuis saved the Diorelles, again and again, while the Diorelles have only caused the Omuis pain. I hoped that my brother would fix things for you, but…here we are. I'm sorry, Meropapa."

The king bowed his head. If he were not standing before the citizenry, he surely would have dropped to his knees, so great was his sorrow. That little bow contained a veritable flood of emotions—his feelings as a royal and as a friend. Duke Omui had left his own domain in a vulnerable position to come to the aid of the king. That must have been what weighed on his heart as he bowed.

"Bow not, Diallo," Lord Omui boomed. "You are the king of Diorelle. Bow and smile for *the people*. I cannot have you overcast this spectacle today, even as the king. A happy ending has been gifted to us. So laugh, my king!"

Duke Omui let out raucous laughter as he waved to the people below. He wanted to go back to the frontier most of all, but even he put on a smile to respond to the rejoicing of the people of the city. If these great men were duty-bound to smile, then all a humble servant such as myself could do was laugh. Perform the role given to me upon this stage and put on a smile. Our hearts, however, were not here. They followed the boy into the wild and dangerous frontier.

As we prayed for the boy facing off against tens of thousands of soldiers alone.

◆

AFTERWORD

◆

I CAN ONLY SPECULATE about what kind of madness brought us all the way to Volume 6 of this mess. Reading can only give you a small helping of the stress I've given my "too many pages hee hee" editor Y-san (middle-aged male). Or maybe it's more of a hexing than a helping, or more of a *help-me-officer-it's-him-again!* Because Y-san accomplished the inconceivable—dealing with six consecutive drafts that were way too long. *Da-da-da-dum, da-da!*

Perhaps I ought to offer my apologies, or swim in my own offal, apoplectic. Regardless, thanks to such a fearless editor, we were able to complete six volumes. With my boundless gratitude to all, and boundless hatred toward my managing editors—*ahem, ahem*, I have much thanks to give. Especially for Y-san, who allowed this "four pages hee hee" of an afterword. I considered if it was even physically possible to thank him adequately. I have concluded it's not and so I'll attempt it as a purely mental exercise, with plenty of stretching along the way.

Because of its explosive ending, I tried concluding Volume 1 with a *Fin*, which Y-san vetoed. I tried the same for Volume 2 because I had to do something flashy to keep you hooked after luring you poor readers in with pictures of cute girls on the covers. He nixed that one as well. Oh, and in the previous volume, I tried throwing it out there as an unexpected twist after pulling along readers for five volumes. Despite all that mischief, he allowed me to write a sixth volume.

Since the "Kingdom Arc" was always going to last until Volume 6, I always felt like it was hard to decide where to end things. But then when I revised this volume…I realized that there *still* wasn't a good place to leave off (oops). So…no *Fin* this time either.

I'd also like to thank Saku Enomaru-sensei for their amazing drawings, as always. I asked my editor if my humble story really deserved

these incredible drawings, and he responded without hesitation, “It absolutely doesn’t.” Thank you for such beautiful art for four volumes!

(If I remember correctly, when I asked the same thing about Boota-sensei’s drawings in Volumes 1 and 2, and Bibi-sensei’s drawings for the manga, I got the same answer?!)

Now we’re getting the simultaneous release of the *Loner Life* manga, so I’d like to thank Bibi-sensei and the editors over at Gardo Comics as well. I don’t use social media much, but I’m making sure to keep up on Twitter!

Next, I’d like to thank everyone who bought this book. Next-next, everyone who read my novel online and gave their feedback (i.e., pointing out typos). After all of that, it’s a bit mysterious how my manuscript still had a mountain of typos, and a deeper mystery still that even after publication, some typos still remained… I’m so, so sorry, Ouraidou-sama. So, so sorry.

I get the sense that all I write is ‘thank you’ in these, but I can’t help it. I keep thinking that every volume will be the last. I’ve certainly never thought, *Next time, I’ll actually write the correct number of pages*.

So…we finally made it to the capital. Woot!

Best-selling works tend to have a template where the hero embarks on a journey and grows as they travel the world. I, on the other hand, have a shut-in who goes back home as soon as every adventure is done, which means that his growth gets undone no matter how much he travels. He didn’t go back in this volume, but he certainly spent plenty of time shut inside. He’s not *stationary* while he’s being shut-up indoors, but he mostly made himself at home in the capital, too…lol?

Obviously, Haruka met a lot of new people…but he didn’t remember their names, so the number of characters didn’t technically increase. Normally, readers would get all pumped about a new heroine or something, but all that gets tossed to the side here. (Sorry?) Yup, the heroines seem to be for decorating the covers above all else… That’s my bad.

Just like you’d expect from a fantasy novel, we finally got an elf, who got completely, utterly ignored. It’s my sixth time feeling this way, but does a book like that really deserve to go on shelves?

Per usual, the plot plodded along in these word-stuffed pages. I plodded and plumped up the wordcount with no expectation that this novel would *actually* be on shelves someday, so I moseyed and dilly-dallied without any thought for word limits, hitting that 'return' key as much as I darn pleased. Getting *that* novel turned legit into a real, published novel was downright terrifying, so I coped with even more word-plumping and moseying…yup. Sounds like me. Personally, I call it a torture method with the way it plods and plumps, something that should be banned for its cruelty potential. So truly, I cannot thank you enough for sticking with me for six volumes, lol.

—SHOJI GOJI

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